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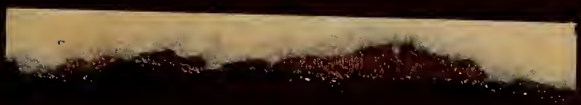

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THE WORKS OF

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

EDINBURGH EDITION

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THE WORKS OF
ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

TALES AND FANTASIES

VOLUME IV

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THE

MISADVENTURES OF JOHN NICHOLSON

THE WRONG BOX

FABLES

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THE MISADVENTURES OF JOHN NICHOLSON

A CHRISTMAS STORY

Originally published:
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Now reprinted for the first time.

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THE
MISADVENTURES OF JOHN NICHOLSON

CHAPTER I

IN WHICH JOHN SOWS THE WIND

JOHN VAREY NICHOLSON was stupid; yet stupider men than he are now sprawling in Parliament, and lauding themselves as the authors of their own distinction. He was of a fat habit, even from boyhood, and inclined to a cheerful and cursory reading of the face of life; and possibly this attitude of mind was the original cause of his misfortunes. Beyond this hint philosophy is silent on his career, and superstition steps in with the more ready explanation that he was detested of the gods.

His father—that iron gentleman—had long ago enthroned himself on the heights of the Disruption Principles. What these are (and in spite of their grim name they are quite innocent) no array of terms would render thinkable to the merely English intelligence; but to the Scot they often prove unctuously nourishing, and Mr. Nicholson found in them the milk of lions. About the period when

the Churches convene at Edinburgh in their annual assemblies, he was to be seen descending the Mound in the company of divers red-headed clergymen: these voluble, he only contributing oracular nods, brief negatives, and the austere spectacle of his stretched upper lip. The names of Candlish and Begg were frequent in these interviews, and occasionally the talk ran on the Residuary Establishment and the doings of one Lee. A stranger to the tight little theological kingdom of Scotland might have listened and gathered literally nothing. And Mr. Nicholson (who was not a dull man) knew this, and raged at it. He knew there was a vast world outside to whom Disruption Principles were as the chatter of tree-top apes; the paper brought him chill whiffs from it; he had met Englishmen who had asked lightly if he did not belong to the Church of Scotland, and then had failed to be much interested by his elucidation of that nice point; it was an evil, wild, rebellious world, lying sunk in *dozenedness*, for nothing short of a Scots word will paint this Scotsman's feelings. And when he entered his own house in Randolph Crescent (south side), and shut the door behind him, his heart swelled with security. Here, at least, was a citadel unassailable by right-hand defections or left-hand extremes. Here was a family where prayers came at the same hour, where the Sabbath literature was unimpeachably selected, where the guest who should have leaned to any false opinion was instantly set down, and over which there reigned all the week, and grew

denser on Sundays, a silence that was agreeable to his ear, and a gloom that he found comfortable.

Mrs. Nicholson had died about thirty, and left him with three children: a daughter two years and a son about eight years younger than John; and John himself, the unfortunate protagonist of the present history. The daughter, Maria, was a good girl—dutiful, pious, dull, but so easily startled that to speak to her was quite a perilous enterprise. 'I don't think I care to talk about that, if you please,' she would say, and strike the boldest speechless by her unmistakable pain; this upon all topics—dress, pleasure, morality, politics, in which the formula was changed to 'my papa thinks otherwise,' and even religion, unless it was approached by a particular whining tone of voice. Alexander, the younger brother, was sickly, clever, fond of books and drawing, and full of satirical remarks. In the midst of these, imagine that natural, clumsy, unintelligent and mirthful animal, John; mighty well-behaved in comparison with many lads, although not up to the standard of the house in Randolph Crescent; full of a sort of blundering affection, full of caresses which were never very warmly received; full of sudden and loud laughters which rang out in that still house like curses. Mr. Nicholson himself had a great fund of humour, of the Scots order—intellectual, turning on the observation of men; his own character, for instance, if he could have seen it in another, would have been a rare feast to him; but his son's empty guffaws over a broken plate, and

empty, almost light-headed remarks, struck him with pain as the indices of a weak mind.

Outside the family John had early attached himself (much as a dog may follow a marquess) to the steps of Alan Houston, a lad about a year older than himself, idle, a trifle wild, the heir to a good estate which was still in the hands of a rigorous trustee, and so royally content with himself that he took John's devotion as a thing of course. The intimacy was gall to Mr. Nicholson; it took his son from the house, and he was a jealous parent; it kept him from the office, and he was a martinet; lastly, Mr. Nicholson was ambitious for his family (in which, and in the Disruption Principles, he entirely lived), and hated to see a son of his play second fiddle to an idler. After some hesitation, he ordered that the friendship should cease—an unfair command, though seemingly inspired by the spirit of prophecy; and John, saying nothing, continued to disobey the order under the rose.

John was nearly nineteen when he was one day dismissed rather earlier than usual from his father's office, where he was studying the practice of the law. It was Saturday; and except that he had a matter of four hundred pounds in his pocket which it was his duty to hand over to the British Linen Company's Bank, he had the whole afternoon at his disposal. He went by Princes Street enjoying the mild sunshine, and the little thrill of easterly wind that tossed the flags along that terrace of palaces, and tumbled the green trees in the garden. The

band was playing down in the valley under the Castle; and when it came to the turn of the pipers, he heard their wild sounds with a stirring of the blood. Something distantly martial woke in him; and he thought of Miss Mackenzie, the daughter of a retired captain of Highlanders, whom he was to meet that day at dinner in his father's house.

Now, it is undeniable that he should have gone directly to the bank; but right in the way stood the billiard-room of the hotel where Alan was almost certain to be found; and the temptation proved too strong. He entered the billiard-room, and was instantly greeted by his friend, cue in hand.

'Nicholson,' said he, 'I want you to lend me a pound or two till Monday.'

'You 've come to the right shop, haven't you?' returned John. 'I have twopence.'

'Nonsense,' said Alan. 'You can get some. Go and borrow at your tailor's; they all do it. Or I 'll tell you what: pop your watch.'

'O yes, I daresay,' said John. 'And how about my father?'

'How is he to know? He doesn't wind it up for you at night, does he?' inquired Alan, at which John guffawed. 'No, seriously; I am in a fix,' continued the tempter. 'I have lost some money to a man here. I 'll give it you to-night, and you can get the heirloom out again on Monday. Come; it 's a small service, after all. I would do a good deal more for you.'

Whereupon John went forth, and pawned his gold

watch under the assumed name of John Froggs, 85 Pleasance. But the nervousness that assailed him at the door of that inglorious haunt, a pawnshop, and the effort necessary to invent the pseudonym (which somehow seemed to him a necessary part of the procedure), had taken more time than he imagined; and when he returned to the billiard-room with the spoils, the bank had already closed its doors.

This was a shrewd knock. 'A piece of business had been neglected.' He heard these words in his father's trenchant voice, and trembled, and then dodged the thought. After all, who was to know? He must carry four hundred pounds about with him till Monday, when the neglect could be surreptitiously repaired; and meanwhile, he was free to pass the afternoon on the encircling divan of the billiard-room, smoking his pipe, sipping a pint of ale, and enjoying to the mast-head the modest pleasures of admiration.

None can admire like a young man. Of all youth's passions and pleasures, this is the most common and least alloyed; and every flash of Alan's black eyes, every aspect of his curly head, every graceful reach and easy, stand-off attitude of waiting, everything about him down even to his shirt-sleeves and wrist-links, were seen by John through a luxurious glory. He valued himself by the possession of that royal friend, hugged himself upon the thought, and swam in warm azure; his own defects, like vanquished difficulties, becoming things on which to plume

himself. Only when he thought of Miss Mackenzie there fell upon his mind a shadow of regret; that young lady was worthy of better things than plain John Nicholson, still known among schoolmates by the derisive name of 'Fatty'; and he felt that if he could chalk a cue or stand at ease with such a careless grace as Alan, he could approach the object of his sentiments with a less crushing sense of inferiority.

Before they parted, Alan made a proposal that was startling in the extreme. He would be at Collette's that night about twelve, he said. Why should not John come there and get the money? To go to Collette's was to see life indeed; it was wrong; it was against the laws; it partook, in a very dingy manner, of adventure. Were it known, it was the sort of exploit that disconsidered a young man for good with the more serious classes, but gave him a standing with the riotous. And yet Collette's was not a hell; it could not come, without vaulting hyperbole, under the description of a gilded saloon; and if it was a sin to go there, the sin was merely local and municipal. Collette was simply an unlicensed publican, who gave suppers after eleven at night, the Edinburgh hour of closing. If you belonged to a club, you could get a much better supper at the same hour, and lose not a jot in public esteem. But if you lacked that qualification, and were an-hungered or inclined towards conviviality at unlawful hours, Collette's was your only port. You were very ill supplied. The company was not

recruited from the Senate or the Church, though the Bar was very well represented on the only occasion on which I flew in the face of my country's laws, and, taking my reputation in my hand, penetrated into that grim supper-house. And Collette's frequenters, thrillingly conscious of wrong-doing and 'that two-handed engine (the policeman) at the door,' were perhaps inclined to somewhat feverish excess. But the place was in no sense a very bad one; and it is somewhat strange to me, at this distance of time, how it had acquired its dangerous repute.

In precisely the same spirit as a man may debate a project to ascend the Matterhorn or to cross Africa, John considered Alan's proposal, and, greatly daring, accepted it. As he walked home, the thoughts of this excursion out of the safe places of life into the wild and arduous, stirred and struggled in his imagination with the image of Flora Mackenzie—incongruous and yet kindred thoughts, for did not each imply unusual tightening of the pegs of resolution? did not each woo him forth and warn him back again into himself?

Between these two considerations, at least, he was more than usually moved; and when he got to Randolph Crescent, he quite forgot the four hundred pounds in the inner pocket of his greatcoat, hung up the coat, with its rich freight, upon his particular pin of the hat-stand; and in the very action sealed his doom.

CHAPTER II

IN WHICH JOHN REAPS THE WHIRLWIND

About half-past ten it was John's brave good fortune to offer his arm to Miss Mackenzie, and escort her home. The night was chill and starry; all the way eastward the trees of the different gardens rustled and looked black. Up the stone gully of Leith Walk, when they came to cross it, the breeze made a rush and set the flames of the street-lamps quavering; and when at last they mounted to the Royal Terrace, where Captain Mackenzie lived, a great salt freshness came in their faces from the sea. These phases of the walk remained written on John's memory, each emphasised by the touch of that light hand on his arm; and behind all these aspects of the nocturnal city he saw, in his mind's eye, a picture of the lighted drawing-room at home where he had sat talking with Flora; and his father, from the other end, had looked on with a kind and ironical smile. John had read the significance of that smile, which might have escaped a stranger. Mr. Nicholson had remarked his son's entanglement with satisfaction, tinged by humour; and his smile, if it still was a thought contemptuous, had implied consent.

At the Captain's door the girl held out her hand with a certain emphasis; and John took it and kept it a little longer, and said, 'Good-night, Flora, dear,' and was instantly thrown into much fear by his pre-

sumption. But she only laughed, ran up the steps, and rang the bell; and while she was waiting for the door to open, kept close in the porch and talked to him from that point as out of a fortification. She had a knitted shawl over her head; her blue Highland eyes took the light from the neighbouring street-lamp and sparkled; and when the door opened and closed upon her, John felt cruelly alone.

He proceeded slowly back along the terrace in a tender glow; and when he came to Greenside Church he halted in a doubtful mind. Over the crown of the Calton Hill, to his left, lay the way to Collette's, where Alan would soon be looking for his arrival, and where he would now have no more consented to go than he would have wilfully wallowed in a bog; the touch of the girl's hand on his sleeve, and the kindly light in his father's eyes, both loudly forbidding. But right before him was the way home, which pointed only to bed, a place of little ease for one whose fancy was strung to the lyrical pitch, and whose not very ardent heart was just then tumultuously moved. The hill-top, the cool air of the night, the company of the great monuments, the sight of the city under his feet, with its hills and valleys and crossing files of lamps, drew him by all he had of the poetic, and he turned that way; and by that quite innocent deflection ripened the crop of his venial errors for the sickle of destiny.

On a seat on the hill above Greenside he sat for perhaps half an hour, looking down upon the lamps of Edinburgh, and up at the lamps of heaven.

Wonderful were the resolves he formed; beautiful and kindly were the vistas of future life that sped before him. He uttered to himself the name of Flora in so many touching and dramatic keys that he became at length fairly melted with tenderness, and could have sung aloud. At that juncture the sound of a certain creasing in his greatcoat caught his ear. He put his hand into the pocket, pulled forth the envelope that held the money, and sat stupefied. The Calton Hill, about this period, had an ill name of nights; and to be sitting there with four hundred pounds that did not belong to him was hardly wise. He looked up. There was a man in a very bad hat, a little on one side of him, apparently looking at the scenery; from a little on the other a second night-walker was drawing very quietly near. Up jumped John. The envelope fell from his hands; he stooped to get it, and at the same moment both men ran in and closed with him.

A little after, he got to his feet very sore and shaken, the poorer by a purse which contained exactly one penny postage-stamp, by a cambric handkerchief, and by the all-important envelope.

Here was a young man on whom, at the highest point of loverly exaltation, there had fallen a blow too sharp to be supported alone; and not many hundred yards away his greatest friend was sitting at supper—ay, and even expecting him. Was it not in the nature of man that he should run there? He went in quest of sympathy—in quest of that droll article that we all suppose ourselves to want

when in a strait, and have agreed to call advice; and he went, besides, with vague but rather splendid expectations of relief. Alan was rich, or would be so when he came of age. By a stroke of the pen he might remedy this misfortune, and avert that dreaded interview with Mr. Nicholson, from which John now shrank in imagination as the hand draws back from fire.

Close under the Calton Hill there runs a certain narrow avenue, part street, part by-road. The head of it faces the doors of the prison; its tail descends into the sunless slums of the Low Calton. On one hand it is overhung by the crags of the hill, on the other by an old graveyard. Between these two the roadway runs in a trench, sparsely lighted at night, sparsely frequented by day, and bordered, when it has cleared the place of tombs, by dingy and ambiguous houses. One of these was the house of Collette; and at his door our ill-starred John was presently beating for admittance. In an evil hour he satisfied the jealous inquiries of the contraband hotel-keeper; in an evil hour he penetrated into the somewhat unsavoury interior. Alan, to be sure, was there, seated in a room lit by noisy gas-jets, beside a dirty table-cloth, engaged on a coarse meal, and in the company of several tipsy members of the junior bar. But Alan was not sober; he had lost a thousand pounds upon a horse-race, had received the news at dinner-time, and was now, in default of any possible means of extrication, drowning the memory of his predicament. He to help

John! The thing was impossible; he couldn't help himself.

'If you have a beast of a father,' said he, 'I can tell you I have a brute of a trustee.'

'I 'm not going to hear my father called a beast,' said John, with a beating heart, feeling that he risked the last sound rivet of the chain that bound him to life.

But Alan was quite good-natured.

'All right, old fellow,' said he. 'Mos' respec'able man your father.' And he introduced his friend to his companions as 'old Nicholson the what-d'ye-call-um's son.'

John sat in dumb agony. Collette's foul walls and spotted table-linen, everything down to Collette's villainous casters, seemed like objects in a nightmare. And just then there came a knock and a scurrying: the police, so lamentably absent from the Calton Hill, appeared upon the scene; and the party, taken *flagrante delicto*, with their glasses at their elbow, were seized, marched up to the police office, and all duly summoned to appear as witnesses in the consequent case against that arch-shebeener, Collette.

It was a sorrowful and a mightily sobered company that came forth again. The vague terror of public opinion weighed generally on them all; but there were private and particular horrors on the minds of individuals. Alan stood in dread of his trustee, already sorely tried. One of the group was the son of a country minister, another of a judge; John,

the unhappiest of all, had David Nicholson to father, the idea of facing whom on such a scandalous subject was physically sickening. They stood a while consulting under the buttresses of Saint Giles'; thence they adjourned to the lodgings of one of the number in North Castle Street, where (for that matter) they might have had quite as good a supper, and far better drink, than in the dangerous paradise from which they had been routed. There, over an almost tearful glass, they debated their position. Each explained that he had the world to lose if the affair went on and he appeared as a witness. It was remarkable what bright prospects were just then in the very act of opening before each of that little company of youths, and what pious consideration for the feelings of their families began now to well from them. Each, moreover, was in an odd state of destitution. Not one could bear his share of the fine; not one but evinced a wonderful twinkle of hope that each of the others (in succession) was the very man who could step in to make good the deficit. One took a high hand: he could not pay his share; if it went to a trial he should bolt; he had always felt the English bar to be his true sphere. Another branched out into touching details about his family, to which no one listened. John, in the midst of this disorderly competition of poverty and meanness, sat stunned, contemplating the mountain bulk of his misfortunes.

At last, upon a pledge that each should apply to his family with a common frankness, this convention of unhappy young asses broke up, went down the

common stair, and in the grey of the spring morning, with the streets lying dead empty all about them, the lamps burning on into the daylight in diminished lustre, and the birds beginning to sound premonitory notes from the groves of the town gardens, went each his own way with bowed head and echoing footfall.

The rooks were awake in Randolph Crescent; but the windows looked down, discreetly blinded, on the return of the prodigal. John's pass-key was a recent privilege; this was the first time it had been used; and, O! with what a sickening sense of his unworthiness he now inserted it into the well-oiled lock and entered that citadel of the proprieties! All slept; the gas in the hall had been left faintly burning to light his return; a dreadful stillness reigned, broken by the deep ticking of the eight-day clock. He put the gas out, and sat on a chair in the hall, waiting and counting the minutes, longing for any human countenance. But when at last he heard the alarm-clock spring its rattle in the lower story, and the servants begin to be about, he instantly lost heart, and fled to his own room, where he threw himself upon the bed.

CHAPTER III

IN WHICH JOHN ENJOYS THE HARVEST HOME

SHORTLY after breakfast, at which he assisted with a highly tragical countenance, John sought his father

where he was used to sit, presumably in religious meditation, on the Sabbath mornings. The old gentleman looked up with that sour inquisitive expression that came so near to smiling and was so different in effect.

'This is a time when I do not like to be disturbed,' he said.

'I know that,' returned John; 'but I have—I want—I 've made a dreadful mess of it,' he broke out, and turned to the window.

Mr. Nicholson sat silent for an appreciable time, while his unhappy son surveyed the poles in the back green, and a certain yellow cat that was perched upon the wall. Despair sat upon John as he gazed: and he raged to think of the dreadful series of his misdeeds, and the essential innocence that lay behind them.

'Well,' said the father, with an obvious effort, but in very quiet tones, 'what is it?'

'Maclean gave me four hundred pounds to put in the bank, sir,' began John; 'and I 'm sorry to say that I 've been robbed of it!'

'Robbed of it?' cried Mr. Nicholson, with a strong rising inflection. 'Robbed? Be careful what you say, John!'

'I can't say anything else, sir; I was just robbed of it,' said desperation sullenly.

'And where and when did this extraordinary event take place?' inquired the father.

'On the Calton Hill about twelve last night.'

'The Calton Hill?' repeated Mr. Nicholson.

'And what were you doing there at such a time of the night?'

'Nothing, sir,' says John.

Mr. Nicholson drew in his breath.

'And how came the money in your hands at twelve last night?' he asked sharply.

'I neglected that piece of business,' said John, anticipating comment; and then in his own dialect: 'I clean forgot all about it.'

'Well,' said his father, 'it's a most extraordinary story. Have you communicated with the police?'

'I have,' answered poor John, the blood leaping to his face. 'They think they know the men that did it. I daresay the money will be recovered, if that was all,' said he, with a desperate indifference, which his father set down to levity; but which sprang from the consciousness of worse behind.

'Your mother's watch, too?' asked Mr. Nicholson.

'O, the watch is all right!' cried John. 'At least, I mean I was coming to the watch—the fact is, I am ashamed to say, I—I had pawned the watch before. Here is the ticket; they didn't find that; the watch can be redeemed; they don't sell pledges.' The lad panted out these phrases, one after another, like minute-guns; but at the last word, which rang in that stately chamber like an oath, his heart failed him utterly; and the dreaded silence settled on father and son.

It was broken by Mr. Nicholson picking up the pawn-ticket. 'John Froggs, 85 Pleasance,' he read; and then turning upon John, with a brief flash of

passion and disgust, 'Who is John Froggs?' he cried.

'Nobody,' said John. 'It was just a name.'

'An *alias*,' his father commented.

'O! I think scarcely quite that,' said the culprit; 'it's a form, they all do it, the man seemed to understand; we had a great deal of fun over the name——'

He paused at that, for he saw his father wince at the picture like a man physically struck; and again there was silence.

'I do not think,' said Mr. Nicholson at last, 'that I am an ungenerous father. I have never grudged you money within reason, for any avowable purpose; you had just to come to me and speak. And now I find that you have forgotten all decency and all natural feeling, and actually pawned—pawned—your mother's watch. You must have had some temptation; I will do you the justice to suppose it was a strong one. What did you want with this money?'

'I would rather not tell you, sir,' said John. 'It will only make you angry.'

'I will not be fenced with,' cried his father. 'There must be an end of disingenuous answers. What did you want with this money?'

'To lend it to Houston, sir,' says John.

'I thought I had forbidden you to speak to that young man?' asked the father.

'Yes, sir,' said John; 'but I only met him.'

'Where?' came the deadly question.

And 'In a billiard-room,' was the damning answer. Thus had John's single departure from the truth brought instant punishment. For no other purpose but to see Alan would he have entered a billiard-room; but he had desired to palliate the fact of his disobedience, and now it appeared that he frequented these disreputable haunts upon his own account.

Once more Mr. Nicholson digested the vile tidings in silence; and when John stole a glance at his father's countenance, he was abashed to see the marks of suffering.

'Well,' said the old gentleman at last, 'I cannot pretend not to be simply bowed down. I rose this morning what the world calls a happy man—happy, at least, in a son of whom I thought I could be reasonably proud——'

But it was beyond human nature to endure this longer; and John interrupted almost with a scream. 'O, wheest!' he cried, 'that's not all, that's not the worst of it—it's nothing! How could I tell you were proud of me? O, I wish, I wish that I had known; but you always said I was such a disgrace! And the dreadful thing is this: we were all taken up last night, and we have to pay Collette's fine among the six, or we'll be had up for evidence—shebeening it is. They made me swear to tell you; but for my part,' he cried, bursting into tears, 'I just wish that I was dead!' And he fell on his knees before a chair and hid his face.

Whether his father spoke, and whether he re-

mained long in the room or at once departed, are points lost to history. A horrid turmoil of mind and body; bursting sobs; broken, vanishing thoughts, now of indignation, now of remorse; broken elementary whiffs of consciousness, of the smell of the horsehair on the chair-bottom, of the jangling of church bells that now began to make day horrible throughout the confines of the city, of the hard floor that bruised his knees, of the taste of tears that found their way into his mouth: for a period of time, the duration of which I cannot guess, while I refuse to dwell longer on its agony, these were the whole of God's world for John Nicholson.

When at last, as by the touching of a spring, he returned again to clearness of consciousness and even a measure of composure, the bells had but just done ringing, and the Sabbath silence was still marred by the patter of belated feet. By the clock above the fire, as well as by these more speaking signs, the service had not long begun; and the unhappy sinner, if his father had really gone to church, might count on near two hours of only comparative unhappiness. With his father, the superlative degree returned infallibly. He knew it by every shrinking fibre in his body, he knew it by the sudden dizzy whirling of his brain, at the mere thought of that calamity. An hour and a half, perhaps an hour and three quarters, if the Doctor was long-winded, and then would begin again that active agony from which, even in the dull ache of

the present, he shrank as from the bite of fire. He saw, in a vision, the family pew, the somnolent cushions, the Bibles, the Psalm-books, Maria with her smelling-salts, his father sitting spectacled and critical; and at once he was struck with indignation, not unjustly. It was inhuman to go off to church and leave a sinner in suspense, unpunished, unforgiven. And at the very touch of criticism the paternal sanctity was lessened; yet the paternal terror only grew; and the two strands of feeling drew him in the same direction.

And suddenly there came upon him a mad fear lest his father should have locked him in. The notion had no ground in sense; it was probably no more than a reminiscence of similar calamities in childhood, for his father's room had always been the chamber of inquisition and the scene of punishment; but it stuck so rigorously in his mind that he must instantly approach the door and prove its untruth. As he went, he struck upon a drawer left open in the business table. It was the money drawer—a measure of his father's disarray: the money drawer —perhaps a pointing providence! Who is to decide, when even divines differ, between a providence and a temptation? Or who, sitting calmly under his own vine, is to pass a judgment on the doings of a poor hunted dog, slavishly afraid, slavishly rebellious, like John Nicholson on that particular Sunday? His hand was in the drawer almost before his mind had conceived the hope; and rising to his new situation, he wrote, sitting in his father's chair and

using his father's blotting-pad, his pitiful apology and farewell—

'My dear Father,—I have taken the money, but I will pay it back as soon as I am able. You will never hear of me again. I did not mean any harm by anything, so I hope you will try and forgive me. I wish you would say good-bye for me to Alexander and Maria, but not if you don't want to. I could not wait to see you, really. Please try to forgive me.

'Your affectionate son,

'John Nicholson.'

The coins abstracted and the missive written, he could not be gone too soon from the scene of these transgressions; and remembering how his father had once returned from church, on some slight illness, in the middle of the second psalm, he durst not even make a packet of a change of clothes. Attired as he was, he slipped from the paternal doors, and found himself in the cool spring air, the thin spring sunshine, and the great Sabbath quiet of the city, which was now only pointed by the cawing of the rooks. There was not a soul in Randolph Crescent, nor a soul in Queensferry Street; in this outdoor privacy and the sense of escape, John took heart again; and with a pathetic sense of leave-taking he even ventured up the lane and stood a while, a strange peri at the gates of a quaint paradise, by the west end of St. George's Church. They were singing within; and by a strange chance the tune was 'St. George's, Edinburgh,' which bears the name, and was first sung in the choir, of that church. 'Who is this King of Glory?' went the voices from within;

and to John this was like the end of all Christian observances, for he was now to be a wild man like Ishmael and his life was to be cast in homeless places and with godless people.

It was thus, with no rising sense of the adventurous, but in mere desolation and despair, that he turned his back on his native city, and set out on foot for California—with a more immediate eye to Glasgow.

CHAPTER IV

THE SECOND SOWING

It is no part of mine to narrate the adventures of John Nicholson, which were many, but simply his more momentous misadventures, which were more than he desired, and by human standards more than he deserved. How he reached California, how he was rooked, and robbed, and beaten, and starved; how he was at last taken up by charitable folk, restored to some degree of self-complacency, and installed as a clerk in a bank in San Francisco, it would take too long to tell; nor in these episodes were there any marks of the peculiar Nicholsonic destiny, for they were just such matters as befell some thousands of other young adventurers in the same days and places. But once posted in the bank, he fell for a time into a high degree of good fortune, which, as it was only a longer way about to fresh disaster, it behoves me to explain.

It was his luck to meet a young man in what is technically called a 'dive,' and, thanks to his monthly wages, to extricate this new acquaintance from a position of present disgrace and possible danger in the future. This young man was the nephew of one of the Nob Hill magnates, who run the San Francisco stock exchange much as more humble adventurers, in the corner of some public park at home, may be seen to perform the simple artifice of pea and thimble: for their own profit, that is to say, and the discouragement of public gambling. It was hence in his power—and as he was of grateful temper, it was among the things that he desired—to put John in the way of growing rich; and thus, without thought or industry, or so much as even understanding the game at which he played, but by simply buying and selling what he was told to buy and sell, that plaything of fortune was presently at the head of between eleven and twelve thousand pounds, or, as he reckoned it, of upwards of sixty thousand dollars.

How he had come to deserve this wealth, any more than how he had formerly earned disgrace at home, was a problem beyond the reach of his philosophy. It was true that he had been industrious at the bank, but no more so than the cashier, who had seven small children and was visibly sinking in a decline. Nor was the step which had determined his advance—a visit to a dive with a month's wages in his pocket—an act of such transcendent virtue, or even wisdom, as to seem to merit the favour of the

gods. From some sense of this, and of the dizzy see-saw, heaven-high, hell-deep, on which men sit clutching; or perhaps fearing that the sources of his fortune might be insidiously traced to some root in the field of petty cash; he stuck to his work, said not a word of his new circumstances, and kept his account with a bank in a different quarter of the town. The concealment, innocent as it seems, was the first step in the second tragi-comedy of John's existence.

Meanwhile he had never written home. Whether from diffidence or shame, or a touch of anger, or mere procrastination, or because (as we have seen) he had no skill in literary arts, or because (as I am sometimes tempted to suppose) there is a law in human nature that prevents young men, not otherwise beasts, from the performance of this simple act of piety:—months and years had gone by, and John had never written. The habit of not writing, indeed, was already fixed before he had begun to come into his fortune; and it was only the difficulty of breaking this long silence that withheld him from an instant restitution of the money he had stolen or (as he preferred to call it) borrowed. In vain he sat before paper, attending on inspiration; that heavenly nymph, beyond suggesting the words, 'My dear father,' remained obstinately silent; and presently John would crumple up the sheet and decide, as soon as he had 'a good chance,' to carry the money home in person. And this delay, which is indefensible, was his second step into the snares of fortune.

Ten years had passed, and John was drawing near to thirty. He had kept the promise of his boyhood, and was now of a lusty frame, verging towards corpulence; good features, good eyes, a genial manner, a ready laugh, a long pair of sandy whiskers, a dash of an American accent, a close familiarity with the great American joke, and a certain likeness to a R-y-l P-rs-n-ge, who shall remain nameless for me, made up the man's externals as he could be viewed in society. Inwardly, in spite of his gross body and highly masculine whiskers, he was more like a maiden lady than a man of twenty-nine.

It chanced one day, as he was strolling down Market Street on the eve of his fortnight's holiday, that his eye was caught by certain railway bills, and in very idleness of mind he calculated that he might be home for Christmas if he started on the morrow. The fancy thrilled him with desire, and in one moment he decided he would go.

There was much to be done: his portmanteau to be packed, a credit to be got from the bank, where he was a wealthy customer, and certain offices to be transacted for that other bank in which he was a humble clerk; and it chanced, in conformity with human nature, that out of all this business it was the last that came to be neglected. Night found him not only equipped with money of his own, but once more (as on that former occasion) saddled with a considerable sum of other people's.

Now it chanced there lived in the same boarding-house a fellow-clerk of his, an honest fellow with

what is called a weakness for drink—though it might, in this case, have been called a strength, for the victim was capable of being drunk for weeks together without intermission. To this unfortunate John intrusted a letter with an enclosure of bonds, addressed to the bank manager. Even as he did so he thought he perceived a certain haziness of eye and speech in his trustee; but he was too hopeful to be stayed, silenced the voice of warning in his bosom, and with one and the same gesture committed the money to the clerk, and himself into the hands of destiny.

I dwell, even at the risk of tedium, on John's minutest errors, his case being so perplexing to the moralist; but we have done with them now, the roll is closed, the reader has the worst of our poor hero, and I leave him to judge for himself whether he or John has been the less deserving. Henceforth we have to follow the spectacle of a man who was a mere whiptop for calamity; on whose unmerited misadventures not even the humorist can look without pity, and not even the philosopher without alarm.

That same night the clerk entered upon a bout of drunkenness so consistent as to surprise even his intimate acquaintance. He was speedily ejected from the boarding-house; deposited his portmanteau with a perfect stranger, who did not even catch his name; wandered he knew not where; and was at last hove-to, all standing, in a hospital at Sacramento. There, under the impenetrable *alias* of the number of his bed, the crapulous being lay for some more

days unconscious of all things, and of one thing in particular: that the police were after him. Two months had come and gone before the convalescent in the Sacramento hospital was identified with Kirkman, the absconding San Francisco clerk; even then, there must elapse nearly a fortnight more till the perfect stranger could be hunted up, the portmanteau recovered, and John's letter carried at length to its destination, the seal still unbroken, the enclosure still intact.

Meanwhile John had gone upon his holidays without a word, which was irregular; and there had disappeared with him a certain sum of money, which was out of all bounds of palliation. But he was known to be careless, and believed to be honest; the manager besides had a regard for him; and little was said, although something was no doubt thought, until the fortnight was finally at an end, and the time had come for John to reappear. Then, indeed, the affair began to look black; and when inquiries were made, and the penniless clerk was found to have amassed thousands of dollars, and kept them secretly in a rival establishment, the stoutest of his friends abandoned him, the books were overhauled for traces of ancient and artful fraud, and though none were found, there still prevailed a general impression of loss. The telegraph was set in motion; and the correspondent of the bank in Edinburgh, for which place it was understood that John had armed himself with extensive credits, was warned to communicate with the police.

Now this correspondent was a friend of Mr. Nicholson's; he was well acquainted with the tale of John's calamitous disappearance from Edinburgh; and putting one thing with another, hasted with the first word of this scandal, not to the police, but to his friend. The old gentleman had long regarded his son as one dead; John's place had been taken, the memory of his faults had already fallen to be one of those old aches, which awaken again indeed upon occasion, but which we can always vanquish by an effort of the will; and to have the long lost resuscitated in a fresh disgrace was doubly bitter.

'MacEwen,' said the old man, 'this must be hushed up, if possible. If I give you a cheque for this sum, about which they are certain, could you take it on yourself to let the matter rest?'

'I will,' said MacEwen. 'I will take the risk of it.'

'You understand,' resumed Mr. Nicholson, speaking precisely, but with ashen lips; 'I do this for my family, not for that unhappy young man. If it should turn out that these suspicions are correct, and he has embezzled large sums, he must lie on his bed as he has made it.' And then looking up at MacEwen with a nod, and one of his strange smiles, 'Good-bye,' said he; and MacEwen, perceiving the case to be too grave for consolation, took himself off, and blessed God on his way home that he was childless.

CHAPTER V

THE PRODIGAL'S RETURN

By a little after noon on the eve of Christmas, John had left his portmanteau in the cloak-room, and stepped forth into Princes Street with a wonderful expansion of the soul, such as men enjoy on the completion of long-nourished schemes. He was at home again, incognito and rich; presently he could enter his father's house by means of the pass-key, which he had piously preserved through all his wanderings; he would throw down the borrowed money; there would be a reconciliation, the details of which he frequently arranged; and he saw himself, during the next month, made welcome in many stately houses at many frigid dinner-parties, taking his share in the conversation with the freedom of the man and the traveller, and laying down the law upon finance with the authority of the successful investor. But this programme was not to be begun before evening—not till just before dinner, indeed, at which meal the re-assembled family were to sit roseate, and the best wine (the modern fatted calf) should flow for the prodigal's return.

Meanwhile he walked familiar streets, merry reminiscences crowding round him, sad ones also, both with the same surprising pathos. The keen frosty air; the low, rosy, wintry sun; the Castle, hailing him like an old acquaintance; the names of

friends on door-plates; the sight of friends whom he seemed to recognise, and whom he eagerly avoided, in the streets; the pleasant chant of the north-country accent; the dome of St. George's, reminding him of his last penitential moments in the lane, and of that King of Glory whose name had echoed ever since in the saddest corner of his memory; and the gutters where he had learned to slide, and the shop where he had bought his skates, and the stones on which he had trod, and the railings in which he had rattled his clacken as he went to school; and all those thousand and one nameless particulars which the eye sees without noting, which the memory keeps indeed yet without knowing, and which, taken one with another, build up for us the aspect of the place that we call home: all these besieged him, as he went, with both delight and sadness.

His first visit was for Houston, who had a house on Regent Terrace, kept for him in old days by an aunt. The door was opened (to his surprise) upon the chain, and a voice asked him from within what he wanted.

'I want Mr. Houston — Mr. Alan Houston,' said he.

'And who are you?' said the voice.

'This is most extraordinary,' thought John; and then aloud he told him his name.

'No' young Mr. John?' cried the voice, with a sudden increase of Scottish accent, testifying to a friendlier feeling.

'The very same,' said John.

And the old butler removed his defences, remarking only, 'I thocht ye were that man.' But his master was not there; he was staying, it appeared, at the house in Murrayfield; and though the butler would have been glad enough to have taken his place and given all the news of the family, John, struck with a little chill, was eager to be gone. Only, the door was scarce closed again, before he regretted that he had not asked about 'that man.'

He was to pay no more visits till he had seen his father and made all well at home; Alan had been the only possible exception, and John had not time to go as far as Murrayfield. But here he was on Regent Terrace; there was nothing to prevent him going round the end of the hill, and looking from without on the Mackenzies' house. As he went he reflected that Flora must now be a woman of near his own age, and it was within the bounds of possibility that she was married; but this dishonourable doubt he dammed down.

There was the house, sure enough; but the door was of another colour, and what was this—two door-plates? He drew nearer; the top one bore, with dignified simplicity, the words, 'Mr. Proudfoot'; the lower one was more explicit, and informed the passer-by that here was likewise the abode of 'Mr. J. A. Dunlop Proudfoot, Advocate.' The Proudfoots must be rich, for no advocate could look to have much business in so remote a quarter; and John hated them for their wealth and for their name, and for the sake of the house they desecrated with

their presence. He remembered a Proudfoot he had seen at school, not known; a little whey-faced urchin, the despicable member of some lower class. Could it be this abortion that had climbed to be an advocate, and now lived in the birthplace of Flora and the home of John's tenderest memories? The chill that had first seized upon him when he heard of Houston's absence deepened and struck inward. For a moment, as he stood under the doors of that estranged house, and looked east and west along the solitary pavement of the Royal Terrace, where not a cat was stirring, the sense of solitude and desolation took him by the throat, and he wished himself in San Francisco.

And then the figure he made, with his decent portliness, his whiskers, the money in his purse, the excellent cigar that he now lit, recurred to his mind in consolatory comparison with that of a certain maddened lad who, on a certain spring Sunday ten years before, and in the hour of church-time silence, had stolen from that city by the Glasgow road. In the face of these changes it were impious to doubt fortune's kindness. All would be well yet; the Mackenzies would be found, Flora, younger and lovelier and kinder than before; Alan would be found, and would have so nicely discriminated his behaviour as to have grown, on the one hand, into a valued friend of Mr. Nicholson's, and to have remained, upon the other, of that exact shade of joviality which John desired in his companions. And so, once more, John fell to work discounting the

delightful future: his first appearance in the family pew; his first visit to his uncle Greig, who thought himself so great a financier, and on whose purblind Edinburgh eyes John was to let in the dazzling daylight of the West; and the details in general of that unrivalled transformation scene, in which he was to display to all Edinburgh a portly and successful gentleman in the shoes of the derided fugitive.

The time began to draw near when his father would have returned from the office, and it would be the prodigal's cue to enter. He strolled westward by Albany Street, facing the sunset embers, pleased, he knew not why, to move in that cold air and indigo twilight, starred with street-lamps. But there was one more disenchantment waiting him by the way.

At the corner of Pitt Street he paused to light a fresh cigar; the vesta threw, as he did so, a strong light upon his features, and a man of about his own age stopped at sight of it.

'I think your name must be Nicholson,' said the stranger.

It was too late to avoid recognition; and besides, as John was now actually on the way home, it hardly mattered, and he gave way to the impulse of his nature.

'Great Scott!' he cried, 'Beatson!' and shook hands with warmth. It scarce seemed he was repaid in kind.

'So you're home again?' said Beatson. 'Where have you been all this long time?'

'In the States,' said John—'California. I 've made my pile though; and it suddenly struck me it would be a noble scheme to come home for Christmas.'

'I see,' said Beatson. 'Well, I hope we 'll see something of you now you 're here.'

'I guess so,' said John, a little frozen.

'Well, ta-ta,' concluded Beatson, and he shook hands again and went.

This was a cruel first experience. It was idle to blink facts: here was John home again, and Beatson —Old Beatson—did not care a rush. He recalled Old Beatson in the past—the merry and affectionate lad—and their joint adventures and mishaps, the window they had broken with a catapult in India Place, the escalade of the Castle rock, and many another inestimable bond of friendship; and his hurt surprise grew deeper. Well, after all, it was only on a man's own family that he could count: blood was thicker than water, he remembered; and the net result of this encounter was to bring him to the doorstep of his father's house with tenderer and softer feelings.

The night had come; the fanlight over the door shone bright; the two windows of the dining-room where the cloth was being laid, and the three windows of the drawing-room where Maria would be waiting dinner, glowed softer through yellow blinds. It was like a vision of the past. All this time of his absence, life had gone forward with an equal foot, and the fires and the gas had been lighted, and the meals spread, at the accustomed hours. At the accustomed

hour, too, the bell had sounded thrice to call the family to worship. And at the thought a pang of regret for his demerit seized him; he remembered the things that were good and that he had neglected, and the things that were evil and that he had loved; and it was with a prayer upon his lips that he mounted the steps and thrust the key into the keyhole.

He stepped into the lighted hall, shut the door softly behind him, and stood there fixed in wonder. No surprise of strangeness could equal the surprise of that complete familiarity. There was the bust of Chalmers near the stair-railings, there was the clothes-brush in the accustomed place; and there, on the hat-stand, hung hats and coats that must surely be the same as he remembered. Ten years dropped from his life, as a pin may slip between the fingers; and the ocean, and the mountains, and the mines, and the crowded marts and mingled races of San Francisco, and his own fortune and his own disgrace, became, for that one moment, the figures of a dream that was over.

He took off his hat, and moved mechanically towards the stand; and there he found a small change that was a great one to him. The pin that had been his from boyhood, where he had hung his Balmoral when he loitered home from the Academy, and his first hat when he came briskly back from college or the office—his pin was occupied. 'They might have at least respected my pin!' he thought, and he was moved as by a slight, and began at once

to recollect that he was here an interloper, in a strange house, which he had entered almost by a burglary, and where at any moment he might be scandalously challenged.

He moved at once, his hat still in his hand, to the door of his father's room, opened it, and entered. Mr. Nicholson sat in the same place and posture as on that last Sunday morning; only he was older, and greyer, and sterner; and as he now glanced up and caught the eye of his son, a strange commotion and a dark flush sprang into his face.

'Father,' said John steadily, and even cheerfully, for this was a moment against which he was long ago prepared, 'Father, here I am, and here is the money that I took from you. I have come back to ask your forgiveness, and to stay Christmas with you and the children.'

'Keep your money,' said the father, 'and go!'

'Father!' cried John; 'for God's sake don't receive me this way. I 've come for——'

'Understand me,' interrupted Mr. Nicholson; 'you are no son of mine; and in the sight of God, I wash my hands of you. One last thing I will tell you; one warning I will give you: all is discovered, and you are being hunted for your crimes; if you are still at large it is thanks to me; but I have done all that I mean to do; and from this time forth I would not raise one finger—not one finger—to save you from the gallows! And now,' with a low voice of absolute authority, and a single weighty gesture of the finger, 'and now—go!'

CHAPTER VI

THE HOUSE AT MURRAYFIELD

How John passed the evening, in what windy confusion of mind, in what squalls of anger and lulls of sick collapse, in what pacing of streets and plunging into public-houses, it would profit little to relate. His misery, if it were not progressive, yet tended in no way to diminish; for in proportion as grief and indignation abated, fear began to take their place. At first, his father's menacing words lay by in some safe drawer of memory, biding their hour. At first, John was all thwarted affection and blighted hope; next bludgeoned vanity raised its head again, with twenty mortal gashes; and the father was disowned even as he had disowned the son. What was this regular course of life, that John should have admired it? what were these clock-work virtues, from which love was absent? Kindness was the test, kindness the aim and soul; and judged by such a standard, the discarded prodigal—now rapidly drowning his sorrows and his reason in successive drams—was a creature of a lovelier morality than his self-righteous father. Yes, he was the better man; he felt it, glowed with the consciousness, and entering a public-house at the corner of Howard Place (whither he had somehow wandered) he pledged his own virtues in a glass—perhaps the fourth since his dismissal. Of that he knew nothing, keeping

no account of what he did or where he went; and in the general crashing hurry of his nerves, unconscious of the approach of intoxication. Indeed, it is a question whether he were really growing intoxicated, or whether at first the spirits did not even sober him. For it was even as he drained this last glass that his father's ambiguous and menacing words—popping from their hiding-place in memory —startled him like a hand laid upon his shoulder. 'Crimes, hunted, the gallows.' They were ugly words; in the ears of an innocent man, perhaps all the uglier; for if some judicial error were in act against him, who should set a limit to its grossness or to how far it might be pushed? Not John, indeed; he was no believer in the powers of innocence, his curst experience pointing in quite other ways; and his fears, once wakened, grew with every hour and hunted him about the city streets.

It was perhaps nearly nine at night; he had eaten nothing since lunch, he had drunk a good deal, and he was exhausted by emotion, when the thought of Houston came into his head. He turned, not merely to the man as a friend, but to his house as a place of refuge. The danger that threatened him was still so vague, that he knew neither what to fear nor where he might expect it; but this much at least seemed undeniable, that a private house was safer than a public inn. Moved by these counsels, he turned at once to the Caledonian Station, passed (not without alarm) into the bright lights of the approach, redeemed his portmanteau from the cloak-

room, and was soon whirling in a cab along the Glasgow road. The change of movement and position, the sight of the lamps twinkling to the rear, and the smell of damp and mould and rotten straw which clung about the vehicle, wrought in him strange alternations of lucidity and mortal giddiness.

'I have been drinking,' he discovered; 'I must go straight to bed, and sleep.' And he thanked heaven for the drowsiness that came upon his mind in waves.

From one of these spells he was wakened by the stoppage of the cab; and, getting down, found himself in quite a country road, the last lamp of the suburb shining some way below, and the high walls of a garden rising before him in the dark. The Lodge (as the place was named) stood, indeed, very solitary. To the south it adjoined another house, but standing in so large a garden as to be well out of cry; on all other sides, open fields stretched upward to the woods of Corstorphine Hill, or backward to the dells of Ravelston, or downward towards the valley of the Leith. The effect of seclusion was aided by the great height of the garden walls, which were, indeed, conventual and, as John had tested in former days, defied the climbing schoolboy. The lamp of the cab threw a gleam upon the door and the not brilliant handle of the bell.

'Shall I ring for ye?' said the cabman, who had descended from his perch and was slapping his chest, for the night was bitter.

'I wish you would,' said John, putting his hand to his brow in one of his accesses of giddiness.

The man pulled at the handle, and the clanking of the bell replied from further in the garden; twice and thrice he did it, with sufficient intervals; in the great, frosty silence of the night the sounds fell sharp and small.

'Does he expect ye?' asked the driver, with that manner of familiar interest that well became his port-wine face; and when John had told him no, 'Well, then,' said the cabman, 'if ye'll tak' my advice of it, we'll just gang back. And that's disinterested, mind ye, for my stables are in the Glesgie road.'

'The servants must hear,' said John.

'Hout!' said the driver. 'He keeps no servants here, man. They're a' in the town house; I drive him often; it's just a kind of a hermitage this.'

'Give me the bell,' said John; and he plucked at it like a man desperate.

The clamour had not yet subsided before they heard steps upon the gravel, and a voice of singular nervous irritability cried to them through the door, 'Who are you, and what do you want?'

'Alan,' said John, 'it's me—it's Fatty—John, you know. I'm just come home, and I've come to stay with you.'

There was no reply for a moment, and then the door was opened.

'Get the portmanteau down,' said John to the driver.

'Do nothing of the kind,' said Alan; and then to John, 'Come in here a moment. I want to speak to you.'

John entered the garden, and the door was closed behind him. A candle stood on the gravel walk, winking a little in the draughts; it threw inconstant sparkles on the clumped holly, struck the light and darkness to and fro like a veil on Alan's features, and sent his shadow hovering behind him. All beyond was inscrutable; and John's dizzy brain rocked with the shadow. Yet even so, it struck him that Alan was pale, and his voice, when he spoke, unnatural.

'What brings you here to-night?' he began. 'I don't want, God knows, to seem unfriendly; but I cannot take you in, Nicholson; I cannot do it.'

'Alan,' said John, 'you've just got to! You don't know the mess I'm in; the governor's turned me out, and I daren't show face in an inn, because they're down on me for murder or something!'

'For what?' cried Alan, starting.

'Murder, I believe,' says John.

'Murder!' repeated Alan, and passed his hand over his eyes. 'What was that you were saying?' he asked again.

'That they were down on me,' said John. 'I'm accused of murder, by what I can make out; and I've really had a dreadful day of it, Alan, and I can't sleep on the roadside on a night like this—at least, not with a portmanteau,' he pleaded.

'Hush!' said Alan, with his head on one side; and then, 'Did you hear nothing?' he asked.

'No,' said John, thrilling, he knew not why, with communicated terror. 'No, I heard nothing; why?' And then, as there was no answer, he reverted to his pleading: 'But I say, Alan, you've just got to take me in. I'll go right away to bed if you have anything to do. I seem to have been drinking; I was that knocked over. I wouldn't turn you away, Alan, if you were down on your luck.'

'No?' returned Alan. 'Neither will I you, then. Come and let's get your portmanteau.'

The cabman was paid, and drove off down the long, lamp-lit hill, and the two friends stood on the sidewalk beside the portmanteau till the last rumble of the wheels had died in silence. It seemed to John as though Alan attached importance to this departure of the cab; and John, who was in no state to criticise, shared profoundly in the feeling.

When the stillness was once more perfect, Alan shouldered the portmanteau, carried it in, and shut and locked the garden door; and then, once more, abstraction seemed to fall upon him, and he stood with his hand on the key, until the cold began to nibble at John's fingers.

'Why are we standing here?' asked John.

'Eh?' said Alan blankly.

'Why, man, you don't seem yourself,' said the other.

'No, I'm not myself,' said Alan; and he sat down on the portmanteau and put his face in his hands.

John stood beside him swaying a little, and looking about him at the swaying shadows, the flitting sparkles, and the steady stars overhead, until the windless cold began to touch him through his clothes on the bare skin. Even in his bemused intelligence, wonder began to awake.

'I say, let 's come on to the house,' he said at last.

'Yes, let 's come on to the house,' repeated Alan.

And he rose at once, re-shouldered the portmanteau, and, taking the candle in his other hand, moved forward to the Lodge. This was a long, low building, smothered in creepers; and now, except for some chinks of light between the dining-room shutters, it was plunged in darkness and silence.

In the hall Alan lit another candle, gave it to John, and opened the door of a bedroom.

'Here,' said he; 'go to bed. Don't mind me, John. You 'll be sorry for me when you know.'

'Wait a bit,' returned John; 'I 've got so cold with all that standing about. Let 's go into the dining-room a minute. Just one glass to warm me, Alan.'

On the table in the hall stood a glass, and a bottle with a whisky label on a tray. It was plain the bottle had been just opened, for the cork and corkscrew lay beside it.

'Take that,' said Alan, passing John the whisky, and then with a certain roughness pushed his friend into the bedroom, and closed the door behind him.

John stood amazed; then he shook the bottle, and, to his further wonder, found it partly empty.

Three or four glasses were gone. Alan must have uncorked a bottle of whisky and drunk three or four glasses one after the other, without sitting down, for there was no chair, and that in his own cold lobby on this freezing night! It fully explained his eccentricities, John reflected sagely, as he mixed himself a grog. Poor Alan! He was drunk; and what a dreadful thing was drink, and what a slave to it poor Alan was, to drink in this unsociable, uncomfortable fashion! The man who would drink alone, except for health's sake—as John was now doing—was a man utterly lost. He took the grog out, and felt hazier, but warmer. It was hard work opening the portmanteau and finding his night things; and before he was undressed, the cold had struck home to him once more. 'Well,' said he; 'just a drop more. There's no sense in getting ill with all this other trouble.' And presently dreamless slumber buried him.

When John awoke it was day. The low winter sun was already in the heavens, but his watch had stopped, and it was impossible to tell the hour exactly. Ten, he guessed it, and made haste to dress, dismal reflections crowding on his mind. But it was less from terror than from regret that he now suffered; and with his regret there were mingled cutting pangs of penitence. There had fallen upon him a blow, cruel, indeed, but yet only the punishment of old misdoing; and he had rebelled and plunged into fresh sin. The rod had been used to chasten, and he had bit the chastening fingers. His father was right: John had justified him; John

was no guest for decent people's houses, and no fit associate for decent people's children. And had a broader hint been needed, there was the case of his old friend. John was no drunkard, though he could at times exceed; and the picture of Houston drinking neat spirits at his hall-table struck him with something like disgust. He hung back from meeting his old friend. He could have wished he had not come to him; and yet, even now, where else was he to turn?

These musings occupied him while he dressed, and accompanied him into the lobby of the house. The door stood open on the garden; doubtless Alan had stepped forth; and John did as he supposed his friend had done. The ground was hard as iron, the frost still rigorous; as he brushed among the hollies, icicles jingled and glittered in their fall; and wherever he went, a volley of eager sparrows followed him. Here were Christmas weather and Christmas morning duly met, to the delight of children. This was the day of reunited families, the day to which he had so long looked forward, thinking to awake in his own bed in Randolph Crescent, reconciled with all men and repeating the footprints of his youth; and here he was alone, pacing the alleys of a wintry garden and filled with penitential thoughts.

And that reminded him: why was he alone? and where was Alan? The thought of the festal morning and the due salutations reawakened his desire for his friend, and he began to call for him by name.

As the sound of his voice died away, he was aware of the greatness of the silence that environed him. But for the twittering of the sparrows and the crunching of his own feet upon the frozen snow, the whole windless world of air seemed to hang over him entranced, and the stillness weighed upon his mind with a horror of solitude.

Still calling at intervals, but now with a moderated voice, he made the hasty circuit of the garden, and finding neither man nor trace of man in all its evergreen coverts, turned at last to the house. About the house the silence seemed to deepen strangely. The door, indeed, stood open as before; but the windows were still shuttered, the chimneys breathed no stain into the bright air, there sounded abroad none of that low stir (perhaps audible rather to the ear of the spirit than to the ear of the flesh) by which a house announces and betrays its human lodgers. And yet Alan must be there—Alan locked in drunken slumbers, forgetful of the return of day, of the holy season, and of the friend whom he had so coldly received and was now so churlishly neglecting. John's disgust redoubled at the thought; but hunger was beginning to grow stronger than repulsion, and as a step to breakfast, if to nothing else, he must find and arouse the sleeper.

He made the circuit of the bedroom quarters. All, until he came to Alan's chamber, were locked from without, and bore the marks of a long disuse. But Alan's was a room in commission, filled with clothes, knick-knacks, letters, books, and the con-

veniences of a solitary man. The fire had been lit; but it had long ago burnt out, and the ashes were stone cold. The bed had been made, but it had not been slept in.

Worse and worse, then: Alan must have fallen where he sat, and now sprawled brutishly, no doubt, upon the dining-room floor.

The dining-room was a very long apartment, and was reached through a passage; so that John, upon his entrance, brought but little light with him, and must move towards the windows with spread arms, groping and knocking on the furniture. Suddenly he tripped and fell his length over a prostrate body. It was what he had looked for, yet it shocked him; and he marvelled that so rough an impact should not have kicked a groan out of the drunkard. Men had killed themselves ere now in such excesses, a dreary and degraded end that made John shudder. What if Alan were dead? There would be a Christmas Day!

By this, John had his hand upon the shutters, and flinging them back, beheld once again the blessed face of the day. Even by that light the room had a discomfortable air. The chairs were scattered, and one had been overthrown; the table-cloth, laid as if for dinner, was twitched upon one side, and some of the dishes had fallen to the floor. Behind the table lay the drunkard, still unaroused, only one foot visible to John.

But now that light was in the room the worst seemed over; it was a disgusting business, but not

more than disgusting; and it was with no great apprehension that John proceeded to make the circuit of the table: his last comparatively tranquil moment for that day. No sooner had he turned the corner, no sooner had his eyes alighted on the body, than he gave a smothered, breathless cry, and fled out of the room and out of the house.

It was not Alan who lay there, but a man well up in years, of stern countenance and iron-grey locks; and it was no drunkard, for the body lay in a black pool of blood, and the open eyes stared upon the ceiling.

To and fro walked John before the door. The extreme sharpness of the air acted on his nerves like an astringent, and braced them swiftly. Presently, he not relaxing in his disordered walk, the images began to come clearer and stay longer in his fancy; and next the power of thought came back to him, and the horror and danger of his situation rooted him to the ground.

He grasped his forehead, and staring on one spot of gravel, pieced together what he knew and what he suspected. Alan had murdered some one: possibly 'that man' against whom the butler chained the door in Regent Terrace; possibly another; some one at least: a human soul, whom it was death to slay and whose blood lay spilt upon the floor. This was the reason of the whisky-drinking in the passage, of his unwillingness to welcome John, of his strange behaviour and bewildered words; this was why he had started at and harped upon the

name of murder; this was why he had stood and hearkened, or sat and covered his eyes, in the black night. And now he was gone, now he had basely fled; and to all his perplexities and dangers John stood heir.

'Let me think, let me think,' he said aloud, impatiently, even pleadingly, as if to some merciless interrupter. In the turmoil of his wits, a thousand hints and hopes and threats and terrors dinning continuously in his ears, he was like one plunged in the hubbub of a crowd. How was he to remember—he, who had not a thought to spare—that he was himself the author, as well as the theatre, of so much confusion? But in hours of trial the junto of man's nature is dissolved, and anarchy succeeds.

It was plain he must stay no longer where he was, for here was a new Judicial Error in the very making. It was not so plain where he must go, for the old Judicial Error, vague as a cloud, appeared to fill the habitable world; whatever it might be, it watched for him, full-grown, in Edinburgh; it must have had its birth in San Francisco; it stood guard no doubt, like a dragon, at the bank where he should cash his credit; and though there were doubtless many other places, who should say in which of them it was not ambushed? No, he could not tell where he was to go; he must not lose time on these insolubilities. Let him go back to the beginning. It was plain he must stay no longer where he was. It was plain, too, that he must not flee as he was, for he could

not carry his portmanteau, and to flee and leave it was to plunge deeper in the mire. He must go, leave the house unguarded, find a cab, and return —return after an absence? Had he courage for that?

And just then he spied a stain about a hand's breadth on his trousers-leg, and reached his finger down to touch it. The finger was stained red; it was blood; he stared upon it with disgust, and awe, and terror, and in the sharpness of the new sensation, fell instantly to act.

He cleansed his finger in the snow, returned into the house, drew near with hushed footsteps to the dining-room door, and shut and locked it. Then he breathed a little freer, for here at least was an oaken barrier between himself and what he feared. Next, he hastened to his room, tore off the spotted trousers, which seemed in his eyes a link to bind him to the gallows, flung them in a corner, donned another pair, breathlessly crammed his night-things into his portmanteau, locked it, swung it with an effort from the ground, and with a rush of relief came forth again under the open heavens.

The portmanteau, being of Occidental build, was no feather-weight; it had distressed the powerful Alan; and as for John, he was crushed under its bulk, and the sweat broke upon him thickly. Twice he must set it down to rest before he reached the gate; and when he had come so far, he must do as Alan did, and take his seat upon one corner. Here, then, he sat a while and panted; but now his thoughts

were sensibly lightened; now, with the trunk standing just inside the door, some part of his dissociation from the house of crime had been effected, and the cabman need not pass the garden wall. It was wonderful how that relieved him; for the house, in his eyes, was a place to strike the most cursory beholder with suspicion, as though the very windows had cried murder.

But there was to be no remission of the strokes of fate. As he thus sat, taking breath in the shadow of the wall, and hopped about by sparrows, it chanced that his eye roved to the fastening of the door; and what he saw plucked him to his feet. The thing locked with a spring; once the door was closed, the bolt shot of itself; and without a key there was no means of entering from the road.

He saw himself compelled to one of two distasteful and perilous alternatives: either to shut the door altogether and set his portmanteau out upon the wayside, a wonder to all beholders; or to leave the door ajar, so that any thievish tramp or holiday schoolboy might stray in and stumble on the grisly secret. To the last, as the least desperate, his mind inclined; but he must first ensure himself that he was unobserved. He peered out, and down the long road: it lay dead empty. He went to the corner of the by-road that comes by way of Dean; there also not a passenger was stirring. Plainly it was, now or never, the high tide of his affairs; and he drew the door as close as he durst, slipped a pebble in the chink, and made off down hill to find a cab.

Half-way down a gate opened, and a troop of Christmas children sallied forth in the most cheerful humour, followed more soberly by a smiling mother.

'And this is Christmas Day!' thought John; and could have laughed aloud in tragic bitterness of heart.

CHAPTER VII

A TRAGI-COMEDY IN A CAB

In front of Donaldson's Hospital, John counted it good fortune to perceive a cab a great way off, and by much shouting and waving of his arm to catch the notice of the driver. He counted it good fortune, for the time was long to him till he should have done for ever with the Lodge; and the farther he must go to find a cab, the greater the chance that the inevitable discovery had taken place, and that he should return to find the garden full of angry neighbours. Yet when the vehicle drew up he was sensibly chagrined to recognise the port-wine cabman of the night before. 'Here,' he could not but reflect, 'here is another link in the Judicial Error.'

The driver, on the other hand, was pleased to drop again upon so liberal a fare; and as he was a man, the reader must already have perceived, of easy, not to say familiar, manners, he dropped at once into a vein of friendly talk, commenting on the weather, on the sacred season, which struck him chiefly in the light of a day of liberal gratuities, on

the chance which had reunited him to a pleasing customer, and on the fact that John had been (as he was pleased to call it) visibly 'on the ran-dan' the night before.

'And ye look dreidful bad the-day, sir, I must say that,' he continued. 'There's nothing like a dram for ye—if ye'll take my advice of it; and bein' as it's Christmas, I'm no' saying,' he added, with a fatherly smile, 'but what I would join ye mysel'.'

John had listened with a sick heart.

'I'll give you a dram when we've got through,' said he, affecting a sprightliness which sat on him most unhandsomely, 'and not a drop till then. Business first and pleasure afterwards.'

With this promise the jarvey was prevailed upon to clamber to his place and drive, with hideous deliberation, to the door of the Lodge. There were no signs as yet of any public emotion; only, two men stood not far off in talk, and their presence, seen from afar, set John's pulses buzzing. He might have spared himself his fright, for the pair were lost in some dispute of a theological complexion, and, with lengthened upper lip and enumerating fingers, pursued the matter of their difference, and paid no heed to John.

But the cabman proved a thorn in the flesh. Nothing would keep him on his perch; he must clamber down, comment upon the pebble in the door (which he regarded as an ingenious but unsafe device), help John with the portmanteau, and en-

liven matters with a flow of speech, and especially of questions, which I thus condense:—

'He 'll no' be here himsel', will he? No? Well, he 's an eccentric man—a fair oddity—if ye ken the expression. Great trouble with his tenants, they tell me. I 've driven the faim'ly for years. I drove a cab at his father's waddin'. What 'll your name be?—I should ken your face. Baigrey, ye say? There were Baigreys about Gilmerton; ye 'll be one of that lot? Then this 'll be a friend's portmantie, like? Why? Because the name upon it 's Nucholson! O, if ye 're in a hurry, that 's another job. Waverley Brig'? Are ye for away?'

So the friendly toper prated and questioned and kept John's heart in a flutter. But to this also, as to other evils under the sun, there came a period; and the victim of circumstances began at last to rumble towards the railway terminus at Waverley Bridge. During the transit, he sat with raised glasses in the frosty chill and mouldy fœtor of his chariot, and glanced out sidelong on the holiday face of things, the shuttered shops, and the crowds along the pavement, much as the rider in the Tyburn cart may have observed the concourse gathering to his execution.

At the station his spirits rose again; another stage of his escape was fortunately ended—he began to spy blue water. He called a railway porter, and bade him carry the portmanteau to the cloak-room: not that he had any notion of delay; flight, instant flight, was his design, no matter whither; but he

had determined to dismiss the cabman ere he named, or even chose, his destination, thus possibly baulking the Judicial Error of another link. This was his cunning aim, and now with one foot on the roadway, and one still on the coach-step, he made haste to put the thing in practice, and plunged his hand into his trousers-pocket.

There was nothing there!

O, yes; this time he was to blame. He should have remembered, and when he deserted his blood-stained pantaloons, he should not have deserted along with them his purse. Make the most of his error, and then compare it with the punishment. Conceive his new position, for I lack words to picture it; conceive him condemned to return to that house, from the very thought of which his soul revolted, and once more to expose himself to capture on the very scene of the misdeed; conceive him linked to the mouldy cab and the familiar cabman. John cursed the cabman silently, and then it occurred to him that he must stop the incarceration of his portmanteau; that, at least, he must keep close at hand, and he returned to recall the porter. But his reflections, brief as they had appeared, must have occupied him longer than he supposed, and there was the man already returning with the receipt.

Well, that was settled; he had lost his portmanteau also; for the sixpence with which he had paid the Murrayfield Toll was one that had strayed alone into his waistcoat-pocket, and unless he once more successfully achieved the adventure of the house of

crime, his portmanteau lay in the cloak-room in eternal pawn, for lack of a penny fee. And then he remembered the porter, who stood suggestively attentive, words of gratitude hanging on his lips.

John hunted right and left; he found a coin—prayed God it was a sovereign—drew it out, beheld a halfpenny, and offered it to the porter.

The man's jaw dropped.

'It 's only a halfpenny!' he said, startled out of railway decency.

'I know that,' said John piteously.

And here the porter recovered the dignity of man.

'Thank you, sir,' said he, and would have returned the base gratuity. But John, too, would none of it; and as they struggled, who must join in but the cabman?

'Hoots, Mr. Baigrey,' said he, 'you surely forget what day it is!'

'I tell you I have no change!' cried John.

'Well,' said the driver, 'and what then? I would rather give a man a shillin' on a day like this than put him off with a derision like a bawbee. I 'm surprised at the like of you, Mr. Baigrey!'

'My name is not Baigrey!' broke out John, in mere childish temper and distress.

'Ye told me it was yoursel',' said the cabman.

'I know I did; and what the devil right had you to ask?' cried the unhappy one.

'O very well,' said the driver. 'I know my place, if you know yours—if you know yours!' he repeated, as one who should imply grave doubt; and

muttered inarticulate thunders, in which the grand old name of gentleman was taken seemingly in vain.

O to have been able to discharge this monster, whom John now perceived, with tardy clearsightedness, to have begun betimes the festivities of Christmas! But far from any such ray of consolation visiting the lost, he stood bare of help and helpers, his portmanteau sequestered in one place, his money deserted in another and guarded by a corpse; himself so sedulous of privacy, the cynosure of all men's eyes about the station; and, as if these were not enough mischances, he was now fallen in ill-blood with the beast to whom his poverty had linked him! In ill-blood, as he reflected dismally, with the witness who perhaps might hang or save him! There was no time to be lost; he durst not linger any longer in that public spot; and whether he had recourse to dignity or to conciliation, the remedy must be applied at once. Some happily surviving element of manhood moved him to the former.

'Let us have no more of this,' said he, his foot once more upon the step. 'Go back to where we came from.'

He had avoided the name of any destination, for there was now quite a little band of railway folk about the cab, and he still kept an eye upon the court of justice, and laboured to avoid concentric evidence. But here again the fatal jarvey outmanœuvred him.

'Back to the Ludge?' cried he, in shrill tones of protest.

'Drive on at once!' roared John, and slammed the door behind him, so that the crazy chariot rocked and jingled.

Forth trundled the cab into the Christmas streets, the fare within plunged in the blackness of a despair that neighboured on unconsciousness, the driver on the box digesting his rebuke and his customer's duplicity. I would not be thought to put the pair in competition; John's case was out of all parallel. But the cabman, too, is worth the sympathy of the judicious; for he was a fellow of genuine kindliness and a high sense of personal dignity incensed by drink; and his advances had been cruelly and publicly rebuffed. As he drove, therefore, he counted his wrongs, and thirsted for sympathy and drink. Now, it chanced he had a friend, a publican in Queensferry Street, from whom, in view of the sacredness of the occasion, he thought he might extract a dram. Queensferry Street lies something off the direct road to Murrayfield. But then there is the hilly cross-road that passes by the valley of the Leith and the Dean Cemetery; and Queensferry Street is on the way to that. What was to hinder the cabman, since his horse was dumb, from choosing the cross-roads, and calling on his friend in passing? So it was decided; and the charioteer, already somewhat mollified, turned aside his horse to the right.

John, meanwhile, sat collapsed, his chin sunk upon his chest, his mind in abeyance. The smell of the cab was still faintly present to his senses, and a certain leaden chill about his feet; all else had

disappeared in one vast oppression of calamity and physical faintness. It was drawing on to noon—two-and-twenty hours since he had broken bread; in the interval he had suffered tortures of sorrow and alarm, and had been partly tipsy; and though it was impossible to say he slept, yet when the cab stopped, and the cabman thrust his head into the window, his attention had to be recalled from depths of vacancy.

'If you'll no' *stand* me a dram,' said the driver, with a well-merited severity of tone and manner, 'I daresay ye'll have no objection to my taking one mysel'?'

'Yes—no—do what you like,' returned John; and then, as he watched his tormentor mount the stairs and enter the whisky-shop, there floated into his mind a sense as of something long ago familiar. At that he started fully awake, and stared at the shop-fronts. Yes, he knew them; but when? and how? Long since, he thought; and then, casting his eye through the front glass, which had been recently occluded by the figure of the jarvey, he beheld the tree-tops of the rookery in Randolph Crescent. He was close to home—home, where he had thought, at that hour, to be sitting in the well-remembered drawing-room in friendly converse; and instead——!

It was his first impulse to drop into the bottom of the cab; his next, to cover his face with his hands. So he sat, while the cabman toasted the publican, and the publican toasted the cabman, and

both reviewed the affairs of the nation; so he still sat, when his master condescended to return, and drive off at last downhill, along the curve of Lynedoch Place; but even so sitting, as he passed the end of his father's street, he took one glance from between shielding fingers, and beheld a doctor's carriage at the door.

'Well, just so,' thought he; 'I'll have killed my father! And this is Christmas Day!'

If Mr. Nicholson died, it was down this same road he must journey to the grave; and down this road, on the same errand, his wife had preceded him years before; and many other leading citizens, with the proper trappings and attendance of the end. And now, in that frosty, ill-smelling, straw-carpeted, and ragged-cushioned cab, with his breath congealing on the glasses, towards what other destination was John himself advancing?

The thought stirred his imagination, which began to manufacture many thousand pictures, bright and fleeting like the shapes in a kaleidoscope; and now he saw himself, ruddy and comfortered, sliding in the gutter; and again a little woe-begone, bored urchin tricked forth in crape and weepers, descending this same hill at the foot's-pace of mourning coaches, his mother's body just preceding him; and yet again, his fancy, running far in front, showed him the house at Murrayfield—now standing solitary in the low sunshine, with the sparrows hopping on the threshold and the dead man within staring at the roof, and now, with a sudden change, thronged about

with white-faced, hand-uplifting neighbours, the doctor bursting through their midst and fixing his stethoscope as he went, the policeman shaking a sagacious head beside the body. It was to this he feared that he was driving; in the midst of this he saw himself arrive, heard himself stammer faint explanations, and felt the hand of the constable upon his shoulder. Heavens! how he wished he had played the manlier part; how he despised himself that he had fled that fatal neighbourhood when all was quiet, and should now be tamely travelling back when it was thronging with avengers!

Any strong degree of passion lends, even to the dullest, the forces of the imagination. And so now as he dwelt on what was probably awaiting him at the end of this distressful drive—John, who saw things little, remembered them less, and could not have described them at all, beheld in his mind's eye the garden of the Lodge, detailed as in a map; he went to and fro in it, feeling his terrors; he saw the hollies, the snowy borders, the paths where he had sought Alan, the high, conventual walls, the shut door—what! was the door shut? Ay, truly, he had shut it—shut in his money, his escape, his future life—shut it with these hands, and none could now open it! He heard the snap of the spring-lock like something bursting in his brain, and sat astonied.

And then he awoke again, terror jarring through his vitals. This was no time to be idle; he must be up and doing, he must think. Once at the end

of this ridiculous cruise, once at the Lodge door, there would be nothing for it but to turn the cab and trundle back again. Why, then, go so far? why add another feature of suspicion to a case already so suggestive? why not turn at once? It was easy to say, turn; but whither? He had nowhere now to go to; he could never—he saw it in letters of blood—he could never pay that cab; he was saddled with that cab for ever. O that cab! his soul yearned to be rid of it. He forgot all other cares. He must first quit himself of this ill-smelling vehicle and of the human beast that guided it—first do that; do that at least; do that at once.

And just then the cab suddenly stopped, and there was his persecutor rapping on the front glass, like one with child of some intelligence. John let it down, and beheld the port-wine countenance inflamed with intellectual triumph.

'I ken wha ye are!' cried the husky voice. 'I mind ye now. Ye're a Nucholson. I drove ye to Hermiston to a Christmas party, and ye came back on the box, and I let ye drive.'

It was a fact. John knew the man; they had been even friends. His enemy, he now remembered, was a fellow of great good-nature—endless good-nature—with a boy; why not with a man? Why not appeal to his better side? He grasped at the new hope.

'Great Scott; and so you did,' he cried, as if in a transport of delight, his voice sounding false in his own ears. 'Well, if that's so, I've something

to say to you. I'll just get out, I guess. Where are we, anyway?'

The driver had fluttered his ticket in the eyes of the branch toll-keeper, and they were now brought to on the highest and most solitary part of the by-road. On the left, a row of fieldside trees beshaded it; on the right it was bordered by naked fallows, undulating downhill to the Queensferry Road; in front, Corstorphine Hill raised its snow-bedabbled darkling woods against the sky. John looked all about him, drinking the clear air like wine; then, his eyes returned to the cabman's face as he sat, not ungleefully, awaiting John's communication, with the air of one looking to be tipped.

The features of that face were hard to read, drink had so swollen them, drink had so painted them, in tints that varied from brick red to mulberry. The small grey eyes blinked, the lips moved, with greed; greed was the ruling passion; and though there was some good-nature, some genuine kindliness, a true human touch, in the old toper, his greed was now so set a-fire by hope that all other traits of character lay dormant. He sat there a monument of gluttonous desire.

John's heart slowly fell. He had opened his lips, but he stood there and uttered nought. He sounded the well of his courage, and it was dry. He groped in his treasury of words, and it was vacant. A devil of dumbness had him by the throat; the devil of terror babbled in his ears; and suddenly, without a word uttered, with no conscious purpose

formed in his will, John whipped about, tumbled over the roadside wall, and began running for his life across the fallows.

He had not gone far, he was not past the midst of the first field, when his whole brain thundered within him, 'Fool! You have your watch!' The shock stopped him, and he faced once more towards the cab. The driver was leaning over the wall, brandishing his whip, his face empurpled, roaring like a bull. And John saw (or thought) that he had lost the chance. No watch would pacify the man's resentment now; he would cry for vengeance also. John would be under the eye of the police; his tale would be unfolded, his secret plumbed, his destiny would close on him at last, and for ever.

He uttered a deep sigh; and just as the cabman, taking heart of grace, was beginning at last to scale the wall, his defaulting customer fell again to running, and disappeared into the farther fields.

CHAPTER VIII

SINGULAR INSTANCE OF THE UTILITY OF PASS-KEYS

WHERE he ran at first, John never very clearly knew; nor yet how long a time elapsed ere he found himself in the by-road near the lodge of Ravelston, propped against the wall, his lungs heaving like bellows, his legs leaden heavy, his mind

possessed by one sole desire—to lie down and be unseen. He remembered the thick coverts round the quarry-hole pond, an untrodden corner of the world where he might surely find concealment till the night should fall. Thither he passed down the lane; and when he came there, behold! he had forgotten the frost, and the pond was alive with young people skating, and the pond-side coverts were thick with lookers-on. He looked on a while himself. There was one tall, graceful maiden, skating hand in hand with a youth, on whom she bestowed her bright eyes perhaps too patently; and it was strange with what anger John beheld her. He could have broken forth in curses; he could have stood there, like a mortified tramp, and shaken his fist and vented his gall upon her by the hour—or so he thought; and the next moment his heart bled for the girl. 'Poor creature, it's little she knows!' he sighed. 'Let her enjoy herself while she can!' but was it possible, when Flora used to smile at him on the Braid ponds, she could have looked so fulsome to a sick-hearted bystander?

The thought of one quarry, in his frozen wits, suggested another; and he plodded off towards Craigleith. A wind had sprung up out of the north-west; it was cruel keen, it dried him like a fire, and racked his finger-joints. It brought clouds, too; pale, swift, hurrying clouds, that blotted heaven and shed gloom upon the earth. He scrambled up among the hazelled rubbish-heaps that surround the caldron of the quarry, and lay flat upon the

stones. The wind searched close along the earth, the stones were cutting and icy, the bare hazels wailed about him; and soon the air of the afternoon began to be vocal with those strange and dismal harpings that herald snow. Pain and misery turned in John's limbs to a harrowing impatience and blind desire of change; now he would roll in his harsh lair, and when the flints abraded him was almost pleased; now he would crawl to the edge of the huge pit and look dizzily down. He saw the spiral of the descending roadway, the steep crags, the clinging bushes, the peppering of snow-wreaths, and, far down in the bottom, the diminished crane. Here, no doubt, was a way to end it. But it somehow did not take his fancy.

And suddenly he was aware that he was hungry; ay, even through the tortures of the cold, even through the frosts of despair, a gross, desperate longing after food, no matter what, no matter how, began to wake and spur him. Suppose he pawned his watch? But no, on Christmas Day—this was Christmas Day!—the pawn-shop would be closed. Suppose he went to the public-house close by at Blackhall, and offered the watch, which was worth ten pounds, in payment for a meal of bread and cheese? The incongruity was too remarkable; the good folks would either put him to the door, or only let him in to send for the police. He turned his pockets out one after another; some San Francisco tram-car checks, one cigar, no lights, the pass-key to his father's house, a pocket-handkerchief,

with just a touch of scent: no—money could be raised on none of these. There was nothing for it but to starve; and after all, what mattered it? That also was a door of exit.

He crept close among the bushes, the wind playing round him like a lash; his clothes seemed thin as paper, his joints burned, his skin curdled on his bones. He had a vision of a high-lying cattle-drive in California, and the bed of a dried stream with one muddy pool, by which the vaqueros had encamped: splendid sun over all, the big bonfire blazing, the strips of cow browning and smoking on a skewer of wood; how warm it was, how savoury the steam of scorching meat! And then again he remembered his manifold calamities, and burrowed and wallowed in the sense of his disgrace and shame. And next he was entering Frank's restaurant in Montgomery Street, San Francisco; he had ordered a pan-stew and venison chops, of which he was immoderately fond, and as he sat waiting, Munroe, the good attendant, brought him a whisky-punch; he saw the strawberries float on the delectable cup, he heard the ice chink about the straws. And then he woke again to his detested fate, and found himself sitting, humped together, in a windy combe of quarry-refuse—darkness thick about him, thin flakes of snow flying here and there like rags of paper, and the strong shuddering of his body clashing his teeth like a hiccough.

We have seen John in nothing but the stormiest conditions; we have seen him reckless, desperate,

tried beyond his moderate powers: of his daily self, cheerful, regular, not unthrifty, we have seen nothing; and it may thus be a surprise to the reader to learn that he was studiously careful of his health. This favourite pre-occupation now awoke. If he were to sit there and die of cold, there would be mighty little gained; better the police cell and the chances of a jury trial than the miserable certainty of death at a dyke-side before the next winter's dawn, or death a little later in the gas-lit wards of an infirmary.

He rose on aching legs, and stumbled here and there among the rubbish-heaps, still circumvented by the yawning crater of the quarry; or perhaps he only thought so, for the darkness was already dense, the snow was growing thicker, and he moved like a blind man, and with a blind man's terrors. At last he climbed a fence, thinking to drop into the road, and found himself staggering, instead, among the iron furrows of a ploughland, endless, it seemed, as a whole county. And next he was in a wood, beating among young trees; and then he was aware of a house with many lighted windows, Christmas carriages waiting at the doors, and Christmas drivers (for Christmas has a double edge) becoming swiftly hooded with snow. From this glimpse of human cheerfulness he fled like Cain; wandered in the night, unpiloted, careless of whither he went; fell and lay, and then rose again and wandered farther; and at last, like a transformation scene, behold him in the lighted jaws of the city, staring

at a lamp which had already donned the tilted night-cap of the snow. It came thickly now, a 'Feeding Storm'; and while he yet stood blinking at the lamp, his feet were buried. He remembered something like it in the past, a street lamp crowned and caked upon the windward side with snow, the wind uttering its mournful hoot, himself looking on, even as now; but the cold had struck too sharply on his wits, and memory failed him as to the date and sequel of the reminiscence.

His next conscious moment was on the Dean Bridge; but whether he was John Nicholson of a bank in California Street, or some former John, a clerk in his father's office, he had now clean forgotten. Another blank, and he was thrusting his pass-key into the door-lock of his father's house.

Hours must have passed. Whether crouched on the cold stones or wandering in the fields among the snow, was more than he could tell; but hours had passed. The finger of the hall clock was close on twelve; a narrow peep of gas in the hall lamp shed shadows; and the door of the back room—his father's room—was open and emitted a warm light. At so late an hour all this was strange; the lights should have been out, the doors locked, the good folk safe in bed. He marvelled at the irregularity, leaning on the hall table; and marvelled to find himself there; and thawed and grew once more hungry in the warmer air of the house.

The clock uttered its premonitory catch; in five minutes Christmas Day would be among the days

of the past—Christmas—what a Christmas! Well, there was no use waiting; he had come into that house, he scarce knew how; if they were to thrust him forth again, it had best be done at once; and he moved to the door of the back room and entered.

O, well—then he was insane, as he had long believed.

There, in his father's room, at midnight, the fire was roaring, and the gas blazing; the papers, the sacred papers—to lay a hand on which was criminal—had all been taken off and piled along the floor; a cloth was spread, and a supper laid, upon the business table; and in his father's chair a woman, habited like a nun, sat eating. As he appeared in the doorway, the nun rose, gave a low cry, and stood staring. She was a large woman, strong, calm, a little masculine, her features marked with courage and good sense; and as John blinked back at her, a faint resemblance dodged about his memory, as when a tune haunts us, and yet will not be recalled.

'Why, it's John!' cried the nun.

'I daresay I'm mad,' said John, unconsciously following King Lear; 'but, upon my word, I do believe you're Flora.'

'Of course I am,' replied she.

And yet it is not Flora at all, thought John; Flora was slender, and timid, and of changing colour, and dewy-eyed; and had Flora such an Edinburgh accent? But he said none of these

things, which was perhaps as well. What he said was, 'Then why are you a nun?'

'Such nonsense!' said Flora. 'I'm a sick-nurse; and I am here nursing your sister, with whom, between you and me, there is precious little the matter. But that is not the question. The point is: How do you come here? and are you not ashamed to show yourself?'

'Flora,' said John sepulchrally. 'I haven't eaten anything for three days. Or, at least, I don't know what day it is; but I guess I'm starving.'

'You unhappy man!' she cried. 'Here, sit down and eat my supper; and I'll just run up-stairs and see my patient, not but what I doubt she's fast asleep; for Maria is a *malade imadginaire.*'

With this specimen of the French, not of Stratford-atte-Bowe, but of a finishing establishment in Moray Place, she left John alone in his father's sanctum. He fell at once upon the food; and it is to be supposed that Flora had found her patient wakeful, and been detained with some details of nursing, for he had time to make a full end of all there was to eat, and not only to empty the teapot, but to fill it again from a kettle that was fitfully singing on his father's fire. Then he sat torpid, and pleased, and bewildered; his misfortunes were then half forgotten; his mind considering, not without regret, this unsentimental return to his old love.

He was thus engaged when that bustling woman noiselessly re-entered.

'Have you eaten?' said she. 'Then tell me all about it.'

It was a long and (as the reader knows) a pitiful story; but Flora heard it with compressed lips. She was lost in none of those questionings of human destiny that have, from time to time, arrested the flight of my own pen; for women, such as she, are no philosophers, and behold the concrete only. And women, such as she, are very hard on the imperfect man.

'Very well,' said she, when he had done; 'then down upon your knees at once, and beg God's forgiveness.'

And the great baby plumped upon his knees, and did as he was bid; and none the worse for that! But while he was heartily enough requesting forgiveness on general principles, the rational side of him distinguished, and wondered if, perhaps, the apology were not due upon the other part. And when he rose again from that becoming exercise, he first eyed the face of his old love doubtfully, and then, taking heart, uttered his protest.

'I must say, Flora,' said he, 'in all this business I can see very little fault of mine.'

'If you had written home,' replied the lady, 'there would have been none of it. If you had even gone to Murrayfield reasonably sober, you would never have slept there, and the worst would not have happened. Besides, the whole thing began years ago. You got into trouble, and when your father, honest man, was disappointed, you took the pet, or got

afraid, and ran away from punishment. Well, you've had your own way of it, John, and I don't suppose you like it.'

'I sometimes fancy I'm not much better than a fool,' sighed John.

'My dear John,' said she, 'not much!'

He looked at her, and his eye fell. A certain anger rose within him; here was a Flora he disowned; she was hard; she was of a set colour; a settled, mature, undecorative manner; plain of speech, plain of habit—he had come near saying, plain of face. And this changeling called herself by the same name as the many-coloured, clinging maid of yore; she of the frequent laughter, and the many sighs, and the kind, stolen glances. And to make all worse, she took the upper hand with him, which (as John well knew) was not the true relation of the sexes. He steeled his heart against this sick-nurse.

'And how do you come to be here?' he asked.

She told him how she had nursed her father in his long illness, and when he died, and she was left alone, had taken to nurse others, partly from habit, partly to be of some service in the world; partly, it might be, for amusement. 'There's no accounting for taste,' said she. And she told him how she went largely to the houses of old friends, as the need arose; and how she was thus doubly welcome, as an old friend first, and then as an experienced nurse, to whom doctors would confide the gravest cases.

'And, indeed, it's a mere farce my being here for poor Maria,' she continued; 'but your father takes

her ailments to heart, and I cannot always be refusing him. We are great friends, your father and I; he was very kind to me long ago—ten years ago.'

A strange stir came in John's heart. All this while had he been thinking only of himself? All this while, why had he not written to Flora? In penitential tenderness, he took her hand, and, to his awe and trouble, it remained in his, compliant. A voice told him this was Flora, after all—told him so quietly, yet with a thrill of singing.

'And you never married?' said he.

'No, John; I never married,' she replied.

The hall clock striking two recalled them to the sense of time.

'And now,' said she, 'you have been fed and warmed, and I have heard your story, and now it's high time to call your brother.'

'O!' cried John, chapfallen; 'do you think that absolutely necessary?'

'*I* can't keep you here; I am a stranger,' said she. 'Do you want to run away again? I thought you had enough of that.'

He bowed his head under the reproof. She despised him, he reflected, as he sat once more alone; a monstrous thing for a woman to despise a man; and strangest of all, she seemed to like him. Would his brother despise him too? And would his brother like him?

And presently the brother appeared, under Flora's escort; and, standing afar off beside the doorway, eyed the hero of this tale.

'So this is you?' he said at length.

'Yes, Alick, it's me—it's John,' replied the elder brother feebly.

'And how did you get in here?' inquired the younger.

'O, I had my pass-key,' says John.

'The deuce you had!' said Alexander. 'Ah, you lived in a better world! There are no pass-keys going now.'

'Well, father was always averse to them,' sighed John.

And the conversation then broke down, and the brothers looked askance at one another in silence.

'Well, and what the devil are we to do?' said Alexander. 'I suppose if the authorities got wind of you, you would be taken up?'

'It depends on whether they've found the body or not,' returned John. 'And then there's that cabman, to be sure!'

'O, bother the body!' said Alexander. 'I mean about the other thing. That's serious.'

'Is that what my father spoke about?' asked John. 'I don't even know what it is.'

'About your robbing your bank in California, of course,' replied Alexander.

It was plain, from Flora's face, that this was the first she had heard of it; it was plainer still, from John's, that he was innocent.

'I!' he exclaimed. 'I rob my bank! My God! Flora, this is too much; even you must allow that.'

'Meaning you didn't?' asked Alexander.

'I never robbed a soul in all my days,' cried John: 'except my father, if you call that robbery; and I brought him back the money in this room, and he wouldn't even take it!'

'Look here, John,' said his brother; 'let us have no misunderstanding upon this. MacEwen saw my father; he told him a bank you had worked for in San Francisco was wiring over the habitable globe to have you collared—that it was supposed you had nailed thousands; and it was dead certain you had nailed three hundred. So MacEwen said, and I wish you would be careful how you answer. I may tell you also, that your father paid the three hundred on the spot.'

'Three hundred?' repeated John. 'Three hundred pounds, you mean? That's fifteen hundred dollars. Why, then, it's Kirkman!' he broke out. 'Thank Heaven! I can explain all that. I gave them to Kirkman to pay it for me the night before I left—fifteen hundred dollars, and a letter to the manager. What do they suppose I would steal fifteen hundred dollars for? I'm rich; I struck it rich in stocks. It's the silliest stuff I ever heard of. All that's needful is to cable to the manager: Kirkman has the fifteen hundred—find Kirkman. He was a fellow-clerk of mine, and a hard case; but to do him justice I didn't think he was as hard as this.'

'And what do you say to that, Alick?' asked Flora.

'I say the cablegram shall go to-night!' cried Alexander, with energy. 'Answer prepaid, too. If

this can be cleared away—and upon my word I do believe it can—we shall all be able to hold up our heads again. Here, you John, you stick down the address of your bank manager. You, Flora, you can pack John into my bed, for which I have no further use to-night. As for me, I am off to the post-office, and thence to the High Street about the dead body. The police ought to know, you see, and they ought to know through John; and I can tell them some rigmarole about my brother being a man of a highly nervous organisation, and the rest of it. And then; I'll tell you what, John—did you notice the name upon the cab?'

John gave the name of the driver, which, as I have not been able to commend the vehicle, I here suppress.

'Well,' resumed Alexander, 'I'll call round at their place before I come back, and pay your shot for you. In that way, before breakfast-time, you'll be as good as new.'

John murmured inarticulate thanks. To see his brother thus energetic in his service moved him beyond expression; if he could not utter what he felt, he showed it legibly in his face; and Alexander read it there, and liked it the better in that dumb delivery.

'But there's one thing,' said the latter, 'cablegrams are dear; and I dare say you remember enough of the governor to guess the state of my finances.'

'The trouble is,' said John, 'that all my stamps are in that beastly house.'

'All your what?' asked Alexander.

'Stamps—money,' explained John. 'It's an American expression; I'm afraid I contracted one or two.'

'I have some,' said Flora. 'I have a pound-note up-stairs.'

'My dear Flora,' returned Alexander, 'a pound-note won't see us very far; and besides, this is my father's business, and I shall be very much surprised if it isn't my father who pays for it.'

'I would not apply to him yet; I do not think that can be wise,' objected Flora.

'You have a very imperfect idea of my resources, and none at all of my effrontery,' replied Alexander. 'Please observe.'

He put John from his way, chose a stout knife among the supper things, and with surprising quickness broke into his father's drawer.

'There's nothing easier when you come to try,' he observed, pocketing the money.

'I wish you had not done that,' said Flora. 'You will never hear the last of it.'

'O, I don't know,' returned the young man; 'the governor is human after all. And now, John, let me see your famous pass-key. Get into bed, and don't move for any one till I come back. They won't mind you not answering when they knock; I generally don't myself.'

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CHAPTER IX

IN WHICH MR. NICHOLSON CONCEDES THE PRINCIPLE OF AN ALLOWANCE

In spite of the horrors of the day and the tea-drinking of the night, John slept the sleep of infancy. He was wakened by the maid, as it might have been ten years ago, tapping at the door. The winter sunrise was painting the east; and as the window was to the back of the house, it shone into the room with many strange colours of refracted light. Without, the houses were all cleanly roofed with snow; the garden walls were coped with it a foot in height; the greens lay glittering. Yet strange as snow had grown to John during his years upon the Bay of San Francisco, it was what he saw within that most affected him. For it was to his own room that Alexander had been promoted; there was the old paper with the device of flowers, in which a cunning fancy might yet detect the face of Skinny Jim, of the Academy, John's former dominie; there was the old chest of drawers; there were the chairs—one, two, three—three as before. Only the carpet was new, and the litter of Alexander's clothes and books and drawing materials, and a pencil-drawing on the wall, which (in John's eyes) appeared a marvel of proficiency.

He was thus lying, and looking, and dreaming, hanging, as it were, between two epochs of his life,

when Alexander came to the door, and made his presence known in a loud whisper. John let him in, and jumped back into the warm bed.

'Well, John,' said Alexander, 'the cablegram is sent in your name, and twenty words of answer paid. I have been to the cab office and paid your cab, even saw the old gentleman himself, and properly apologised. He was mighty placable, and indicated his belief you had been drinking. Then I knocked up old MacEwen out of bed, and explained affairs to him as he sat and shivered in a dressing-gown. And before that I had been to the High Street, where they have heard nothing of your dead body, so that I incline to the idea that you dreamed it.'

'Catch me!' said John.

'Well, the police never do know anything,' assented Alexander; 'and at any rate, they have despatched a man to inquire and to recover your trousers and your money, so that really your bill is now fairly clean; and I see but one lion in your path—the governor.'

'I'll be turned out again, you'll see,' said John dismally.

'I don't imagine so,' returned the other; 'not if you do what Flora and I have arranged; and your business now is to dress, and lose no time about it. Is your watch right? Well, you have a quarter of an hour. By five minutes before the half-hour you must be at table, in your old seat, under Uncle Duthie's picture. Flora will be there to keep you

countenance; and we shall see what we shall see.'

'Wouldn't it be wiser for me to stay in bed?' said John.

'If you mean to manage your own concerns, you can do precisely what you like,' replied Alexander; 'but if you are not in your place five minutes before the half-hour I wash my hands of you, for one.'

And thereupon he departed. He had spoken warmly, but the truth is, his heart was somewhat troubled. And as he hung over the banisters, watching for his father to appear, he had hard ado to keep himself braced for the encounter that must follow.

'If he takes it well, I shall be lucky,' he reflected. 'If he takes it ill, why, it 'll be a herring across John's tracks, and perhaps all for the best. He 's a confounded muff, this brother of mine, but he seems a decent soul.'

At that stage a door opened below with a certain emphasis, and Mr. Nicholson was seen solemnly to descend the stairs, and pass into his own apartment. Alexander followed, quaking inwardly, but with a steady face. He knocked, was bidden to enter, and found his father standing in front of the forced drawer, to which he pointed as he spoke.

'This is a most extraordinary thing,' said he; 'I have been robbed!'

'I was afraid you would notice it,' observed his son; 'it made such a beastly hash of the table.'

'You were afraid I would notice it?' repeated

Mr. Nicholson. 'And, pray, what may that mean?'

'That I was the thief, sir,' returned Alexander. 'I took all the money in case the servants should get hold of it; and here is the change, and a note of my expenditure. You were gone to bed, you see, and I did not feel at liberty to knock you up; but I think when you have heard the circumstances you will do me justice. The fact is, I have reason to believe there has been some dreadful error about my brother John; the sooner it could be cleared up the better for all parties; it was a piece of business, sir—and so I took it; and decided, on my own responsibility, to send a telegram to San Francisco. Thanks to my quickness we may hear to-night. There appears to be no doubt, sir, that John has been abominably used.'

'When did this take place?' asked the father.

'Last night, sir, after you were asleep,' was the reply.

'It's most extraordinary,' said Mr. Nicholson. 'Do you mean to say you have been out all night?'

'All night, as you say, sir. I have been to the telegraph and the police-office, and Mr. MacEwen's. O, I had my hands full,' said Alexander.

'Very irregular,' said the father. 'You think of no one but yourself.'

'I do not see that I have much to gain in bringing back my elder brother,' returned Alexander shrewdly.

The answer pleased the old man; he smiled. 'Well, well, I will go into this after breakfast,' said he.

'I 'm sorry about the table,' said the son.

'The table is a small matter; I think nothing of that,' said the father.

'It 's another example,' continued the son, 'of the awkwardness of a man having no money of his own. If I had a proper allowance, like other fellows of my age, this would have been quite unnecessary.'

'A proper allowance!' repeated his father, in tones of blighting sarcasm, for the expression was not new to him. 'I have never grudged you money for any proper purpose.'

'No doubt, no doubt,' said Alexander, 'but then you see you aren't always on the spot to have the thing explained to you. Last night, for instance——'

'You could have wakened me last night,' interrupted his father.

'Was it not some similar affair that first got John into a mess?' asked the son, skilfully evading the point.

But the father was not less adroit. 'And pray, sir, how did you come and go out of the house?' he asked.

'I forgot to lock the door, it seems,' replied Alexander.

'I have had cause to complain of that too often,' said Mr. Nicholson. 'But still I do not understand. Did you keep the servants up?'

'I propose to go into all that at length after breakfast,' returned Alexander. 'There is the half-hour going; we must not keep Miss Mackenzie waiting.'

And, greatly daring, he opened the door.

Even Alexander, who, it must have been perceived, was on terms of comparative freedom with his parent, even Alexander had never before dared to cut short an interview in this high-handed fashion. But the truth is, the very mass of his son's delinquencies daunted the old gentleman. He was like the man with the cart of apples—this was beyond him! That Alexander should have spoiled his table, taken his money, stayed out all night, and then coolly acknowledged all, was something undreamed of in the Nicholsonian philosophy, and transcended comment. The return of the change, which the old gentleman still carried in his hand, had been a feature of imposing impudence; it had dealt him a staggering blow. Then there was the reference to John's original flight—a subject which he always kept resolutely curtained in his own mind; for he was a man who loved to have made no mistakes, and, when he feared he might have made one, kept the papers sealed. In view of all these surprises and reminders, and of his son's composed and masterful demeanour, there began to creep on Mr. Nicholson a sickly misgiving. He seemed beyond his depth; if he did or said anything, he might come to regret it. The young man, besides, as he had pointed out himself, was playing a generous part. And if wrong had been done—and done to one who was after, and in spite of, all, a Nicholson—it should certainly be righted.

All things considered, monstrous as it was to be cut short in his inquiries, the old gentleman sub-

mitted, pocketed the change, and followed his son into the dining-room. During these few steps he once more mentally revolted, and once more, and this time finally, laid down his arms: a still, small voice in his bosom having informed him authentically of a piece of news: that he was afraid of Alexander. The strange thing was that he was pleased to be afraid of him. He was proud of his son; he might be proud of him; the boy had character and grit, and knew what he was doing.

These were his reflections as he turned the corner of the dining-room door. Miss Mackenzie was in the place of honour, conjuring with a tea-pot and a cosy; and, behold! there was another person present, a large, portly, whiskered man of a very comfortable and respectable air, who now rose from his seat and came forward, holding out his hand.

'Good-morning, father,' said he.

Of the contention of feeling that ran high in Mr. Nicholson's starched bosom, no outward sign was visible; nor did he delay long to make a choice of conduct. Yet in that interval he had reviewed a great field of possibilities both past and future: whether it was possible he had not been perfectly wise in his treatment of John; whether it was possible that John was innocent; whether, if he turned John out a second time, as his outraged authority suggested, it was possible to avoid a scandal; and whether, if he went to that extremity, it was possible that Alexander might rebel.

'Hum!' said Mr. Nicholson, and put his hand, limp and dead, into John's.

And then, in an embarrassed silence, all took their places; and even the paper—from which it was the old gentleman's habit to suck mortification daily, as he marked the decline of our institutions—even the paper lay furled by his side.

But presently Flora came to the rescue. She slid into the silence with a technicality, asking if John still took his old inordinate amount of sugar. Thence it was but a step to the burning question of the day; and in tones a little shaken, she commented on the interval since she had last made tea for the prodigal, and congratulated him on his return. And then addressing Mr. Nicholson, she congratulated him also in a manner that defied his ill-humour; and from that launched into the tale of John's misadventures, not without some suitable suppressions.

Gradually Alexander joined; between them, whether he would or no, they forced a word or two from John; and these fell so tremulously, and spoke so eloquently of a mind oppressed with dread, that Mr. Nicholson relented. At length even he contributed a question: and before the meal was at an end all four were talking even freely.

Prayers followed, with the servants gaping at this new-comer whom no one had admitted; and after prayers there came that moment on the clock which was the signal for Mr. Nicholson's departure.

'John,' said he, 'of course you will stay here. Be

very careful not to excite Maria, if Miss Mackenzie thinks it desirable that you should see her.—Alexander, I wish to speak with you alone.' And then, when they were both in the back-room: 'You need not come to the office to-day,' said he; 'you can stay and amuse your brother, and I think it would be respectful to call on Uncle Greig. And, by-the-by' (this spoken with a certain—dare we say?—bashfulness), 'I agree to concede the principle of an allowance; and I will consult with Dr. Durie, who is quite a man of the world and has sons of his own, as to the amount. And, my fine fellow, you may consider yourself in luck!' he added, with a smile.

'Thank you,' said Alexander.

Before noon a detective had restored to John his money, and brought news, sad enough in truth, but perhaps the least sad possible. Alan Houston had been found in his own house in Regent Terrace, under care of the terrified butler. He was quite mad, and instead of going to prison had been taken to Morningside Asylum. The murdered man, it appeared, was an evicted tenant who had for nearly a year pursued his late landlord with threats and insults; and beyond this, the cause and details of the tragedy were lost.

When Mr. Nicholson returned from dinner they were able to put a despatch into his hands:—'John V. Nicholson, Randolph Crescent, Edinburgh.—Kirkman has disappeared; police looking for him. All understood. Keep mind quite easy.—AUSTIN.'

Having had this explained to him, the old gentleman took down the cellar key and departed for two bottles of the 1820 port. Uncle Greig dined there that day, and Cousin Robina, and, by an odd chance, Mr. MacEwen; and the presence of these strangers relieved what might have been otherwise a somewhat strained relation. Ere they departed, the family was welded once more into a fair semblance of unity.

In the end of April John led Flora—or let us say, as more descriptive, Flora led John—to the altar, if altar that may be called which was indeed the drawing-room mantel-piece in Mr. Nicholson's house, with the Reverend Dr. Durie posted on the hearthrug in the guise of Hymen's priest.

The last I saw of them, on a recent visit to the north, was at a dinner-party in the house of my old friend Gellatly Macbride; and after we had, in classic phrase, 'rejoined the ladies,' I had an opportunity to overhear Flora conversing with another married woman on the much canvassed matter of a husband's tobacco.

'O yes!' said she; 'I only allow Mr. Nicholson four cigars a day. Three he smokes at fixed times—after a meal, you know, my dear; and the fourth he can take when he likes with any friend.'

'Bravo!' thought I to myself; 'this is the wife for my friend John!'

THE WRONG BOX

WRITTEN IN

COLLABORATION WITH

LLOYD OSBOURNE

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THE WRONG BOX

CHAPTER I

IN WHICH MORRIS SUSPECTS

How very little does the amateur, dwelling at home at ease, comprehend the labours and perils of the author, and, when he smilingly skims the surface of a work of fiction, how little does he consider the hours of toil, consultation of authorities, researches in the Bodleian, correspondence with learned and illegible Germans—in one word, the vast scaffolding that was first built up and then knocked down, to while away an hour for him in a railway train! Thus I might begin this tale with a biography of Tonti — birthplace, parentage, genius probably inherited from his mother, remarkable instance of precocity, etc. — and a complete treatise on the system to which he bequeathed his name. The material is all beside me in a pigeon-hole, but I scorn to appear vainglorious. Tonti is dead, and I never saw any one who even pretended to regret him; and, as for the tontine system, a word will suffice for all the purposes of this unvarnished narrative.

A number of sprightly youths (the more the merrier) put up a certain sum of money, which is then funded in a pool under trustees; coming on for a century later, the proceeds are fluttered for a moment in the face of the last survivor, who is probably deaf, so that he cannot even hear of his success—and who is certainly dying, so that he might just as well have lost. The peculiar poetry and even humour of the scheme is now apparent, since it is one by which nobody concerned can possibly profit; but its fine, sportsmanlike character endeared it to our grand-parents.

When Joseph Finsbury and his brother Masterman were little lads in white-frilled trousers, their father—a well-to-do merchant in Cheapside—caused them to join a small but rich tontine of seven-and-thirty lives. A thousand pounds was the entrance fee; and Joseph Finsbury can remember to this day the visit to the lawyer's, where the members of the tontine—all children like himself—were assembled together, and sat in turn in the big office chair, and signed their names with the assistance of a kind old gentleman in spectacles and Wellington boots. He remembers playing with the children afterwards on the lawn at the back of the lawyer's house, and a battle-royal that he had with a brother tontiner who had kicked his shins. The sound of war called forth the lawyer from where he was dispensing cake and wine to the assembled parents in the office, and the combatants were separated, and Joseph's spirit (for he was the smaller of the two) commended by the

gentleman in the Wellington boots, who vowed he had been just such another at the same age. Joseph wondered to himself if he had worn at that time little Wellingtons and a little bald head; and when, in bed at night, he grew tired of telling himself stories of sea-fights, he used to dress himself up as the old gentleman, and entertain other little boys and girls with cake and wine.

In the year 1840 the thirty-seven were all alive; in 1850 their number had decreased by six; in 1856 and 1857 business was more lively, for the Crimea and the Mutiny carried off no less than nine. There remained in 1870 but five of the original members, and at the date of my story, including the two Finsburys, but three.

By this time Masterman was in his seventy-third year; he had long complained of the effects of age, had long since retired from business, and now lived in absolute seclusion under the roof of his son Michael, the well-known solicitor. Joseph, on the other hand, was still up and about, and still presented but a semi-venerable figure on the streets in which he loved to wander. This was the more to be deplored because Masterman had led (even to the least particular) a model British life. Industry, regularity, respectability, and a preference for the four per cents. are understood to be the very foundations of a green old age. All these Masterman had eminently displayed, and here he was, *ab agendo*, at seventy-three; while Joseph, barely two years younger, and in the most excellent preserva-

tion, had disgraced himself through life by idleness and eccentricity. Embarked in the leather trade, he had early wearied of business, for which he was supposed to have small parts. A taste for general information, not promptly checked, had soon begun to sap his manhood. There is no passion more debilitating to the mind, unless, perhaps, it be that itch of public speaking which it not infrequently accompanies or begets. The two were conjoined in the case of Joseph; the acute stage of this double malady, that in which the patient delivers gratuitous lectures, soon declared itself with severity, and not many years had passed over his head before he would have travelled thirty miles to address an infant school. He was no student; his reading was confined to elementary text-books and the daily papers; he did not even fly as high as cyclopædias; life, he would say, was his volume. His lectures were not meant, he would declare, for college professors; they were addressed direct to 'the great heart of the people,' and the heart of the people must certainly be sounder than its head, for his lucubrations were received with favour. That entitled, 'How to Live Cheerfully on Forty Pounds a Year' created a sensation among the unemployed. 'Education: Its Aims, Objects, Purposes, and Desirability,' gained him the respect of the shallow-minded. As for his celebrated essay on 'Life Insurance regarded in its Relation to the Masses,' read before the Working Men's Mutual Improvement Society, Isle of Dogs, it was received with a 'literal

ovation' by an unintelligent audience of both sexes, and so marked was the effect that he was next year elected honorary president of the institution, an office of less than no emolument,—since the holder was expected to come down with a donation,—but one which highly satisfied his self-esteem.

While Joseph was thus building himself up a reputation among the more cultivated portion of the ignorant, his domestic life was suddenly overwhelmed by orphans. The death of his younger brother Jacob saddled him with the charge of two boys, Morris and John; and in the course of the same year his family was still further swelled by the addition of a little girl, the daughter of John Henry Hazeltine, Esq., a gentleman of small property and fewer friends. He had met Joseph only once, at a lecture-hall in Holloway; but from that formative experience he returned home to make a new will, and consign his daughter and her fortune to the lecturer. Joseph had a kindly disposition; and yet it was not without reluctance that he accepted this new responsibility, advertised for a nurse, and purchased a second-hand perambulator. Morris and John he made more readily welcome; not so much because of the tie of consanguinity as because the leather business (in which he hastened to invest their fortune of thirty thousand pounds) had recently exhibited inexplicable symptoms of decline. A young but capable Scot was chosen as manager to the enterprise, and the cares of business never again afflicted Joseph Finsbury. Leaving his charges in

the hands of the capable Scot (who was married), he began his extensive travels on the Continent and in Asia Minor.

With a polyglot Testament in one hand and a phrase-book in the other, he groped his way among the speakers of eleven European languages. The first of these guides is hardly applicable to the purposes of the philosophic traveller, and even the second is designed more expressly for the tourist than for the expert in life. But he pressed interpreters into his service—whenever he could get their services for nothing—and by one means and another filled many note-books with the results of his researches.

In these wanderings he spent several years, and only returned to England when the increasing age of his charges needed his attention. The two lads had been placed in a good but economical school, where they had received a sound commercial education; which was somewhat awkward, as the leather business was by no means in a state to court inquiry. In fact, when Joseph went over his accounts preparatory to surrendering his trust, he was dismayed to discover that his brother's fortune had not increased by his stewardship; even by making over to his two wards every penny he had in the world, there would still be a deficit of seven thousand eight hundred pounds. When these facts were communicated to the two brothers in the presence of a lawyer, Morris Finsbury threatened his uncle with all the terrors of the law, and was only prevented from taking

extreme steps by the advice of the professional man.

'You cannot get blood from a stone,' observed the lawyer.

And Morris saw the point and came to terms with his uncle. On the one side, Joseph gave up all that he possessed, and assigned to his nephew his contingent interest in the tontine, already quite a hopeful speculation. On the other, Morris agreed to harbour his uncle and Miss Hazeltine (who had come to grief with the rest), and to pay to each of them one pound a month as pocket-money. The allowance was amply sufficient for the old man; it scarce appears how Miss Hazeltine contrived to dress upon it; but she did, and, what is more, she never complained. She was, indeed, sincerely attached to her incompetent guardian. He had never been unkind; his age spoke for him loudly; there was something appealing in his whole-souled quest of knowledge and innocent delight in the smallest mark of admiration; and, though the lawyer had warned her she was being sacrificed, Julia had refused to add to the perplexities of Uncle Joseph.

In a large, dreary house in John Street, Bloomsbury, these four dwelt together; a family in appearance, in reality a financial association. Julia and Uncle Joseph were, of course, slaves; John, a gentleman with a taste for the banjo, the music-hall, the Gaiety bar, and the sporting papers, must have been anywhere a secondary figure; and the cares and delights of empire devolved entirely upon Morris.

That these are inextricably intermixed is one of the commonplaces with which the bland essayist consoles the incompetent and the obscure, but in the case of Morris the bitter must have largely outweighed the sweet. He grudged no trouble to himself, he spared none to others; he called the servants in the morning, he served out the stores with his own hand, he took soundings of the sherry, he numbered the remainder biscuits; painful scenes took place over the weekly bills, and the cook was frequently impeached, and the tradespeople came and hectored with him in the back parlour upon a question of three farthings. The superficial might have deemed him a miser; in his own eyes he was simply a man who had been defrauded; the world owed him seven thousand eight hundred pounds, and he intended that the world should pay.

But it was in his dealings with Joseph that Morris's character particularly shone. His uncle was a rather gambling stock in which he had invested heavily; and he spared no pains in nursing the security. The old man was seen monthly by a physician, whether he was well or ill. His diet, his raiment, his occasional outings, now to Brighton, now to Bournemouth, were doled out to him like pap to infants. In bad weather he must keep the house. In good weather, by half-past nine he must be ready in the hall; Morris would see that he had gloves and that his shoes were sound; and the pair would start for the leather business arm in arm. The way there was probably dreary enough, for

there was no pretence of friendly feeling; Morris had never ceased to upbraid his guardian with his defalcation and to lament the burthen of Miss Hazeltine; and Joseph, though he was a mild enough soul, regarded his nephew with something very near akin to hatred. But the way there was nothing to the journey back; for the mere sight of the place of business, as well as every detail of its transactions, was enough to poison life for any Finsbury.

Joseph's name was still over the door; it was he who still signed the cheques; but this was only policy on the part of Morris, and designed to discourage other members of the tontine. In reality the business was entirely his; and he found it an inheritance of sorrows. He tried to sell it, and the offers he received were quite derisory. He tried to extend it, and it was only the liabilities he succeeded in extending; to restrict it, and it was only the profits he managed to restrict. Nobody had ever made money out of that concern except the capable Scot, who retired (after his discharge) to the neighbourhood of Banff and built a castle with his profits. The memory of this fallacious Caledonian Morris would revile daily, as he sat in the private office opening his mail, with old Joseph at another table, sullenly awaiting orders, or savagely affixing signatures to he knew not what. And when the man of the heather pushed cynicism so far as to send him the announcement of his second marriage (to Davida, eldest daughter of the Rev. Alexander

M'Craw) it was really supposed that Morris would have had a fit.

Business hours, in the Finsbury leather trade, had been cut to the quick; even Morris's strong sense of duty to himself was not strong enough to dally within those walls and under the shadow of that bankruptcy; and presently the manager and the clerks would draw a long breath, and compose themselves for another day of procrastination. Raw Haste, on the authority of my Lord Tennyson, is half-sister to Delay; but the Business Habits are certainly her uncles. Meanwhile, the leather merchant would lead his living investment back to John Street like a puppy dog; and, having there immured him in the hall, would depart for the day on the quest of seal rings, the only passion of his life. Joseph had more than the vanity of man, he had that of lecturers. He owned he was in fault, although more sinned against (by the capable Scot) than sinning; but had he steeped his hands in gore, he would still not deserve to be thus dragged at the chariot-wheels of a young man, to sit a captive in the halls of his own leather business, to be entertained with mortifying comments on his whole career—to have his costume examined, his collar pulled up, the presence of his mittens verified, and to be taken out and brought home in custody, like an infant with a nurse. At the thought of it his soul would swell with venom, and he would make haste to hang up his hat and coat and the detested mittens, and slink up-stairs to Julia and his note-

books. The drawing-room at least was sacred from Morris; it belonged to the old man and the young girl; it was there that she made her dresses; it was there that he inked his spectacles over the registration of disconnected facts and the calculation of insignificant statistics.

Here he would sometimes lament his connection with the tontine. 'If it were not for that,' he cried one afternoon, 'he would not care to keep me. I might be a free man, Julia. And I could so easily support myself by giving lectures.'

'To be sure you could,' said she; 'and I think it one of the meanest things he ever did to deprive you of that amusement. There were those nice people at the Isle of Cats (wasn't it?) who wrote and asked you so very kindly to give them an address. I did think he might have let you go to the Isle of Cats.'

'He is a man of no intelligence,' cried Joseph. 'He lives here literally surrounded by the absorbing spectacle of life, and for all the good it does him he might just as well be in his coffin. Think of his opportunities! The heart of any other young man would burn within him at the chance. The amount of information that I have it in my power to convey, if he would only listen, is a thing that beggars language, Julia.'

'Whatever you do, my dear, you mustn't excite yourself,' said Julia; 'for you know, if you look at all ill, the doctor will be sent for.'

'That is very true,' returned the old man humbly,

'I will compose myself with a little study.' He thumbed his gallery of note-books. 'I wonder,' he said, 'I wonder (since I see your hands are occupied) whether it might not interest you——'

'Why, of course it would,' cried Julia. 'Read me one of your nice stories—there's a dear!'

He had the volume down and his spectacles upon his nose instanter, as though to forestall some possible retractation. 'What I propose to read to you,' said he, skimming through the pages, 'is the notes of a highly important conversation with a Dutch courier of the name of David Abbas, which is the Latin for abbot. Its results are well worth the money it cost me, for, as Abbas at first appeared somewhat impatient, I was induced to (what is, I believe, singularly called) stand him drink. It runs only to about five-and-twenty pages. Yes, here it is.' He cleared his throat, and began to read.

Mr. Finsbury (according to his own report) contributed about four hundred and ninety-nine five-hundredths of the interview, and elicited from Abbas literally nothing. It was dull for Julia, who did not require to listen; for the Dutch courier, who had to answer, it must have been a perfect nightmare. It would seem as if he had consoled himself by frequent appliances to the bottle; it would even seem that (toward the end) he had ceased to depend on Joseph's frugal generosity and called for the flagon on his own account. The effect, at least, of some mellowing influence was visible in the record: Abbas became suddenly a willing witness; he began

to volunteer disclosures; and Julia had just looked up from her seam with something like a smile, when Morris burst into the house, eagerly calling for his uncle, and the next instant plunged into the room, waving in the air the evening paper.

It was indeed with great news that he came charged. The demise was announced of Lieutenant-General Sir Glasgow Biggar, K.C.S.I., K.C.M.G., etc., and the prize of the tontine now lay between the Finsbury brothers. Here was Morris's opportunity at last. The brothers had never, it is true, been cordial. When word came that Joseph was in Asia Minor, Masterman had expressed himself with irritation. 'I call it simply indecent,' he had said. 'Mark my words—we shall hear of him next at the North Pole.' And these bitter expressions had been reported to the traveller on his return. What was worse, Masterman had refused to attend the lecture on 'Education: Its Aims, Objects, Purposes, and Desirability,' although invited to the platform. Since then the brothers had not met. On the other hand they never had openly quarrelled; Joseph (by Morris's orders) was prepared to waive the advantage of his juniority; Masterman had enjoyed all through life the reputation of a man neither greedy nor unfair. Here, then, were all the elements of compromise assembled; and Morris, suddenly beholding his seven thousand eight hundred pounds restored to him, and himself dismissed from the vicissitudes of the leather trade, hastened the next morning to the office of his cousin Michael.

Michael was something of a public character. Launched upon the law at a very early age, and quite without protectors, he had become a trafficker in shady affairs. He was known to be the man for a lost cause; it was known he could extract testimony from a stone, and interest from a gold mine; and his office was besieged in consequence by all that numerous class of persons who have still some reputation to lose, and find themselves upon the point of losing it; by those who have made undesirable acquaintances, who have mislaid a compromising correspondence, or who are blackmailed by their own butlers. In private life Michael was a man of pleasure; but it was thought his dire experience at the office had gone far to sober him, and it was known that (in the matter of investments) he preferred the solid to the brilliant. What was yet more to the purpose, he had been all his life a consistent scoffer at the Finsbury tontine.

It was therefore with little fear for the result that Morris presented himself before his cousin, and proceeded feverishly to set forth his scheme. For near upon a quarter of an hour the lawyer suffered him to dwell upon its manifest advantages uninterrupted. Then Michael rose from his seat, and, ringing for his clerk, uttered a single clause:

'It won't do, Morris.'

It was in vain that the leather merchant pleaded and reasoned, and returned day after day to plead and reason. It was in vain that he offered a bonus of one thousand, of two thousand, of three thousand

pounds; in vain that he offered, in Joseph's name, to be content with only one-third of the pool. Still there came the same answer: 'It won't do.'

'I can't see the bottom of this,' he said at last. 'You answer none of my arguments, you haven't a word to say. For my part I believe it 's malice.'

The lawyer smiled at him benignly. 'You may believe one thing,' said he; 'whatever else I do, I am not going to gratify any of your curiosity. You see I am a trifle more communicative to-day, because this is our last interview upon the subject.'

'Our last interview!' cried Morris.

'The stirrup-cup, dear boy,' returned Michael. 'I can't have my business hours encroached upon. And, by the by, have you no business of your own? Are there no convulsions in the leather trade?'

'I believe it to be malice,' repeated Morris doggedly. 'You always hated and despised me from a boy.'

'No, no—not hated,' returned Michael soothingly. 'I rather like you than otherwise; there 's such a permanent surprise about you, you look so dark and attractive from a distance. Do you know that to the naked eye you look romantic?—like what they call a man with a history? And indeed, from all that I can hear, the history of the leather trade is full of incident.'

'Yes,' said Morris, disregarding these remarks, 'it 's no use coming here. I shall see your father.'

'O no, you won't,' said Michael. 'Nobody shall see my father.'

'I should like to know why,' cried his cousin.

'I never make any secret of that,' replied the lawyer. 'He is too ill.'

'If he is as ill as you say,' cried the other, 'the more reason for accepting my proposal. I *will* see him.'

'Will you?' said Michael, and he rose and rang for his clerk.

It was now time, according to Sir Faraday Bond, the medical baronet whose name is so familiar at the foot of bulletins, that Joseph (the poor Golden Goose) should be removed into the purer air of Bournemouth; and for that uncharted wilderness of villas the family now shook off the dust of Bloomsbury; Julia delighted, because at Bournemouth she sometimes made acquaintances; John in despair, for he was a man of city tastes; Joseph indifferent where he was, so long as there was pen and ink and daily papers, and he could avoid martyrdom at the office; Morris himself, perhaps, not displeased to pretermit these visits to the city, and have a quiet time for thought. He was prepared for any sacrifice; all he desired was to get his money again and clear his feet of leather; and it would be strange, since he was so modest in his desires, and the pool amounted to upward of a hundred and sixteen thousand pounds —it would be strange, indeed, if he could find no way of influencing Michael. 'If I could only guess his reason,' he repeated to himself; and by day, as he walked in Branksome woods, and by night, as he turned upon his bed, and at meal-times, when

he forgot to eat, and in the bathing-machine, when he forgot to dress himself, that problem was constantly before him: why had Michael refused?

At last, one night, he burst into his brother's room and woke him.

'What 's all this?' asked John.

'Julia leaves this place to-morrow,' replied Morris. 'She must go up to town and get the house ready, and find servants. We shall all follow in three days.'

'Oh, brayvo!' cried John. 'But why?'

'I 've found it out, John,' returned his brother gently.

'It? What?' inquired John.

'Why Michael won't compromise,' said Morris. 'It 's because he can't. It 's because Masterman 's dead, and he 's keeping it dark.'

'Golly!' cried the impressionable John. 'But what 's the use? Why does he do it, anyway?'

'To defraud us of the tontine,' said his brother.

'He couldn't; you have to have a doctor's certificate,' objected John.

'Did you never hear of venal doctors?' inquired Morris. 'They 're as common as blackberries: 'you can pick 'em up for three-pound-ten a head.'

'I wouldn't do it under fifty if I were a sawbones,' ejaculated John.

'And then Michael,' continued Morris, 'is in the very thick of it. All his clients have come to grief; his whole business is rotten eggs. If any man could arrange it, he could; and depend upon it, he has his

plan all straight; and depend upon it, it's a good one, for he's clever and be damned to him! But I'm clever too; and I'm desperate. I lost seven thousand eight hundred pounds when I was an orphan at school.'

'O, don't be tedious,' interrupted John. 'You've lost far more already trying to get it back.'

CHAPTER II

IN WHICH MORRIS TAKES ACTION

SOME days later, accordingly, the three males of this depressing family might have been observed (by a reader of G. P. R. James) taking their departure from the East Station of Bournemouth. The weather was raw and changeable, and Joseph was arrayed in consequence according to the principles of Sir Faraday Bond, a man no less strict (as is well known) on costume than on diet. There are few polite invalids who have not lived, or tried to live, by that punctilious physician's orders. 'Avoid tea, madam,' the reader has doubtless heard him say, 'avoid tea, fried liver, antimonial wine, and bakers' bread. Retire nightly at 10.45; and clothe yourself (if you please) throughout in hygienic flannel. Externally, the fur of the marten is indicated. Do not forget to procure a pair of health boots at Messrs. Dall and Crumbie's.' And he has probably called you back, even after you have paid your fee, to add with stentorian emphasis: 'I had forgotten one caution: avoid kippered sturgeon

as you would the very devil!' The unfortunate Joseph was cut to the pattern of Sir Faraday in every button; he was shod with the health boot; his suit was of genuine ventilating cloth; his shirt of hygienic flannel, a somewhat dingy fabric; and he was draped to the knees in the inevitable greatcoat of marten's fur. The very railway porters at Bournemouth (which was a favourite station of the doctor's) marked the old gentleman for a creature of Sir Faraday. There was but one evidence of personal taste, a vizarded forage-cap; from this form of headpiece, since he had fled from a dying jackal on the plains of Ephesus, and weathered a bora in the Adriatic, nothing could divorce our traveller.

The three Finsburys mounted into their compartment, and fell immediately to quarrelling, a step unseemly in itself and (in this case) highly unfortunate for Morris. Had he lingered a moment longer by the window, this tale need never have been written. For he might then have observed (as the porters did not fail to do) the arrival of a second passenger in the uniform of Sir Faraday Bond. But he had other matters on hand which he judged (God knows how erroneously) to be more important.

'I never heard of such a thing,' he cried, resuming a discussion which had scarcely ceased all morning. 'The bill is not yours; it is mine.'

'It is payable to me,' returned the old gentleman, with an air of bitter obstinacy. 'I will do what I please with my own property.'

The bill was one for eight hundred pounds, which had been given him at breakfast to indorse, and which he had simply pocketed.

'Hear him, Johnny!' cried Morris. 'His property! the very clothes upon his back belong to me.'

'Let him alone,' said John. 'I am sick of both of you.'

'That is no way to speak of your uncle, sir,' cried Joseph. 'I will not endure this disrespect. You are a pair of exceedingly forward, impudent, and ignorant young men, and I have quite made up my mind to put an end to the whole business.'

'O skittles!' said the graceful John.

But Morris was not so easy in his mind. This unusual act of insubordination had already troubled him; and these mutinous words now sounded ominously in his ears. He looked at the old gentleman uneasily. Upon one occasion, many years before, when Joseph was delivering a lecture, the audience had revolted in a body; finding their entertainer somewhat dry, they had taken the question of amusement into their own hands; and the lecturer (along with the board schoolmaster, the Baptist clergyman, and a working man's candidate, who made up his bodyguard) was ultimately driven from the scene. Morris had not been present on that fatal day; if he had, he would have recognised a certain fighting glitter in his uncle's eye, and a certain chewing movement of his lips, as old acquaintances. But even to the inexpert these symptoms breathed of something dangerous.

'Well, well,' said Morris. 'I have no wish to bother you further till we get to London.'

Joseph did not so much as look at him in answer; with tremulous hands he produced a copy of the *British Mechanic*, and ostentatiously buried himself in its perusal.

'I wonder what can make him so cantankerous?' reflected the nephew. 'I don't like the look of it at all.' And he dubiously scratched his nose.

The train travelled forth into the world, bearing along with it the customary freight of obliterated voyagers, and along with these old Joseph, affecting immersion in his paper, and John slumbering over the columns of the *Pink Un*, and Morris revolving in his mind a dozen grudges, and suspicions, and alarms. It passed Christchurch by the sea, Herne with its pine-woods, Ringwood on its mazy river. A little behind time, but not much for the South-Western, it drew up at the platform of a station, in the midst of the New Forest, the real name of which (in case the railway company 'might have the law of me') I shall veil under the *alias* of Browndean.

Many passengers put their heads to the window, and among the rest an old gentleman on whom I willingly dwell, for I am nearly done with him now, and (in the whole course of the present narrative) I am not in the least likely to meet another character so decent. His name is immaterial, not so his habits. He had passed his life wandering in a tweed suit on the Continent of Europe; and years

of *Galignani's Messenger* having at length undermined his eyesight, he suddenly remembered the rivers of Assyria and came to London to consult an oculist. From the oculist to the dentist, and from both to the physician, the step appears inevitable; presently he was in the hands of Sir Faraday, robed in ventilating cloth and sent to Bournemouth; and to that domineering baronet (who was his only friend upon his native soil) he was now returning to report. The case of these tweed-suited wanderers is unique. We have all seen them entering the table-d'hôte (at Spezzia, or Gratz, or Venice) with a genteel melancholy and a faint appearance of having been to India and not succeeded. In the offices of many hundred hotels they are known by name; and yet, if the whole of this wandering cohort were to disappear to-morrow, their absence would be wholly unremarked. How much more, if only one—say this one in the ventilating cloth—should vanish! He had paid his bills at Bournemouth; his worldly effects were all in the van in two portmanteaux, and these after the proper interval would be sold as unclaimed baggage to a Jew; Sir Faraday's butler would be a half-crown poorer at the year's end, and the hotel-keepers of Europe about the same date would be mourning a small but quite observable decline in profits. And that would be literally all. Perhaps the old gentleman thought something of the sort, for he looked melancholy enough as he pulled his bare, grey head back into the carriage, and the train smoked under the bridge,

and forth, with ever quickening speed, across the mingled heaths and woods of the New Forest.

Not many hundred yards beyond Browndean, however, a sudden jarring of brakes set everybody's teeth on edge, and there was a brutal stoppage. Morris Finsbury was aware of a confused uproar of voices, and sprang to the window. Women were screaming, men were tumbling from the windows on the track, the guard was crying to them to stay where they were; at the same time the train began to gather way and move very slowly backward toward Browndean; and the next moment, all these various sounds were blotted out in the apocalyptic whistle and the thundering onslaught of the down express.

The actual collision Morris did not hear. Perhaps he fainted. He had a wild dream of having seen the carriage double up and fall to pieces like a pantomime trick; and sure enough, when he came to himself, he was lying on the bare earth and under the open sky. His head ached savagely; he carried his hand to his brow, and was not surprised to see it red with blood. The air was filled with an intolerable, throbbing roar, which he expected to find die away with the return of consciousness; and instead of that it seemed but to swell the louder and to pierce the more cruelly through his ears. It was a raging, bellowing thunder, like a boiler-riveting factory.

And now curiosity began to stir, and he sat up and looked about him. The track at this point ran

in a sharp curve about a wooded hillock; all of the near side was heaped with the wreckage of the Bournemouth train; that of the express was mostly hidden by the trees; and just at the turn, under clouds of vomiting steam and piled about with cairns of living coal, lay what remained of the two engines, one upon the other. On the heathy margin of the line were many people running to and fro, and crying aloud as they ran, and many others lying motionless like sleeping tramps.

Morris suddenly drew an inference. 'There has been an accident!' thought he, and was elated at his perspicacity. Almost at the same time his eye lighted on John, who lay close by as white as paper. 'Poor old John! poor old cove!' he thought, the schoolboy expression popping forth from some forgotten treasury, and he took his brother's hand in his with childish tenderness. It was perhaps the touch that recalled him; at least John opened his eyes, sat suddenly up, and after several ineffectual movements of his lips, 'What's the row?' said he, in a phantom voice.

The din of that devil's smithy still thundered in their ears. 'Let us get away from that,' Morris cried, and pointed to the vomit of steam that still spouted from the broken engines. And the pair helped each other up, and stood and quaked and wavered and stared about them at the scene of death.

Just then they were approached by a party of men who had already organised themselves for the purposes of rescue.

'Are you hurt?' cried one of these, a young fellow with the sweat streaming down his pallid face, and who, by the way he was treated, was evidently the doctor.

Morris shook his head, and the young man, nodding grimly, handed him a bottle of some spirit.

'Take a drink of that,' he said; 'your friend looks as if he needed it badly. We want every man we can get,' he added; 'there's terrible work before us, and nobody should shirk. If you can do no more you can carry a stretcher.'

The doctor was hardly gone before Morris, under the spur of the dram, awoke to the full possession of his wits.

'My God!' he cried. 'Uncle Joseph!'

'Yes,' said John, 'where can he be? He can't be far off. I hope the old party isn't damaged.'

'Come and help me to look,' said Morris, with a snap of savage determination strangely foreign to his ordinary bearing; and then, for one moment, he broke forth. 'If he's dead!' he cried, and shook his fist at heaven.

To and fro the brothers hurried, staring in the faces of the wounded, or turning the dead upon their backs. They must have thus examined forty people, and still there was no word of Uncle Joseph. But now the course of their search brought them near the centre of the collision, where the boilers were still blowing off steam with a deafening clamour. It was a part of the field not yet gleaned by the rescuing party. The ground, especially on the

margin of the wood, was full of inequalities—here a pit, there a hillock surmounted with a bush of furze. It was a place where many bodies might lie concealed, and they beat it like pointers after game. Suddenly Morris, who was leading, paused and reached forth his index with a tragic gesture. John followed the direction of his brother's hand.

In the bottom of a sandy hole lay something that had once been human. The face had suffered severely, and it was unrecognisable; but that was not required. The snowy hair, the coat of marten, the ventilating cloth, the hygienic flannel—everything down to the health boots from Messrs. Dall and Crumbie's, identified the body as that of Uncle Joseph. Only the forage-cap must have been lost in the convulsion, for the dead man was bareheaded.

'The poor old beggar!' said John, with a touch of natural feeling; 'I would give ten pounds if we hadn't chivied him in the train!'

But there was no sentiment in the face of Morris as he gazed upon the dead. Gnawing his nails, with introverted eyes, his brow marked with the stamp of tragic indignation and tragic intellectual effort, he stood there silent. Here was a last injustice; he had been robbed while he was an orphan at school, he had been lashed to a decadent leather business, he had been saddled with Miss Hazeltine, his cousin had been defrauding him of the tontine, and he had borne all this, we might almost say, with dignity, and now they had gone and killed his uncle!

'Here!' he said suddenly, 'take his heels, we

must get him into the woods. I'm not going to have anybody find this.'

'O, fudge!' said John, 'where's the use?'

'Do what I tell you,' spirted Morris, as he took the corpse by the shoulders. 'Am I to carry him myself?'

They were close upon the borders of the wood; in ten or twelve paces they were under cover; and a little farther back, in a sandy clearing of the trees, they laid their burthen down, and stood and looked at it with loathing.

'What do you mean to do?' whispered John.

'Bury him, to be sure!' responded Morris, and he opened his pocket-knife and began feverishly to dig.

'You'll never make a hand of it with that,' objected the other.

'If you won't help me, you cowardly shirk,' screamed Morris, 'you can go to the devil!'

'It's the childishest folly,' said John; 'but no man shall call me a coward,' and he began to help his brother grudgingly.

The soil was sandy and light, but matted with the roots of the surrounding firs. Gorse tore their hands; and as they baled the sand from the grave it was often discoloured with their blood. An hour passed of unremitting energy upon the part of Morris, of lukewarm help on that of John; and still the trench was barely nine inches in depth. Into this the body was rudely flung: sand was piled upon it, and then more sand must be dug, and gorse

had to be cut to pile on that; and still from one end of the sordid mound a pair of feet projected and caught the light upon their patent-leather toes. But by this time the nerves of both were shaken; even Morris had enough of his grisly task; and they skulked off like animals into the thickest of the neighbouring covert.

'It's the best that we can do,' said Morris, sitting down.

'And now,' said John, 'perhaps you'll have the politeness to tell me what it's all about.'

'Upon my word,' cried Morris, 'if you do not understand for yourself, I almost despair of telling you.'

'O, of course it's some rot about the tontine,' returned the other. 'But it's the merest nonsense. We've lost it, and there's an end.'

'I tell you,' said Morris, 'Uncle Masterman is dead. I know it, there's a voice here that tells me so.'

'Well, and so is Uncle Joseph,' said John.

'He's not dead, unless I choose,' returned Morris.

'And come to that,' cried John, 'if you're right, and Uncle Masterman's been dead ever so long, all we have to do is to tell the truth and expose Michael.'

'You seem to think Michael is a fool,' sneered Morris. 'Can't you understand he's been preparing this fraud for years? He has the whole thing ready: the nurse, the doctor, the undertaker, all bought, the certificate all ready but the date! Let him get

wind of this business, and you mark my words, Uncle Masterman will die in two days and be buried in a week. But see here, Johnny; what Michael can do, I can do. If he plays a game of bluff, so can I. If his father is to live for ever, by God, so shall my uncle!'

'It's illegal, ain't it?' said John.

'A man must have *some* moral courage,' replied Morris with dignity.

'And then suppose you're wrong? Suppose Uncle Masterman's alive and kicking?'

'Well, even then,' responded the plotter, 'we are no worse than we were before; in fact, we're better. Uncle Masterman must die some day; as long as Uncle Joseph was alive, he might have died any day; but we're out of all that trouble now: there's no sort of limit to the game that I propose—it can can be kept up till Kingdom Come.'

'If I could only see how you meant to set about it!' sighed John. 'But you know, Morris, you always were such a bungler.'

'I'd like to know what I ever bungled,' cried Morris; 'I have the best collection of signet rings in London.'

'Well, you know, there's the leather business,' suggested the other. 'That's considered rather a hash.'

It was a mark of singular self-control in Morris that he suffered this to pass unchallenged, and even unresented.

'About the business in hand,' said he, 'once we

can get him up to Bloomsbury, there's no sort of trouble. We bury him in the cellar, which seems made for it; and then all I have to do is to start out and find a venal doctor.'

'Why can't we leave him where he is?' asked John.

'Because we know nothing about the country,' retorted Morris. 'This wood may be a regular lovers' walk. Turn your mind to the real difficulty. How are we to get him up to Bloomsbury?'

Various schemes were mooted and rejected. The railway station at Browndean was of course out of the question, for it would now be a centre of curiosity and gossip, and (of all things) they would be least able to despatch a dead body without remark. John feebly proposed getting an ale-cask and sending it as beer, but the objections to this course were so overwhelming that Morris scorned to answer. The purchase of a packing-case seemed equally hopeless, for why should two gentlemen without baggage of any kind require a packing-case? They would be more likely to require clean linen.

'We are working on wrong lines,' cried Morris at last. 'The thing must be gone about more carefully. Suppose now,' he added excitedly, speaking by fits and starts as if he were thinking aloud, 'suppose we rent a cottage by the month. A householder can buy a packing-case without remark. Then suppose we clear the people out to-day, get the packing-case to-night, and to-morrow I hire a carriage—or a cart that we could drive ourselves—

and take the box, or whatever we get, to Ringwood or Lyndhurst or somewhere; we could label it "Specimens," don't you see? Johnny, I believe I 've hit the nail at last.'

'Well, it sounds more feasible,' admitted John.

'Of course we must take assumed names,' continued Morris. 'It would never do to keep our own. What do you say to "Masterman," itself? It sounds quiet and dignified.'

'I will *not* take the name of Masterman,' returned his brother; 'you may, if you like. I shall call myself Vance—the Great Vance; positively the last six nights. There 's some go in a name like that.'

'Vance!' cried Morris. 'Do you think we are playing a pantomime for our amusement? There was never anybody named Vance who wasn't a music-hall singer.'

'That 's the beauty of it,' returned John; 'it gives you some standing at once. You may call yourself Fortescue till all 's blue, and nobody cares; but to be Vance gives a man a natural nobility.'

'But there 's lots of other theatrical names,' cried Morris. 'Leybourne, Irving, Brough, Toole——'

'Devil a one will I take!' returned his brother. 'I am going to have my little lark out of this as well as you.'

'Very well,' said Morris, who perceived that John was determined to carry his point, 'I shall be Robert Vance.'

'And I shall be George Vance,' cried John, 'the

only original George Vance! Rally round the only original!'

Repairing as well as they were able the disorder of their clothes, Finsbury brothers returned to Browndean by a circuitous route in quest of luncheon and a suitable cottage. It is not always easy to drop at a moment's notice on a furnished residence in a retired locality; but fortune presently introduced our adventurers to a deaf carpenter, a man rich in cottages of the required description, and unaffectedly eager to supply their wants. The second place they visited, standing, as it did, about a mile and a half from any neighbours, caused them to exchange a glance of hope. On a nearer view, the place was not without depressing features. It stood in a marshy-looking hollow of a heath; tall trees obscuring its windows; the thatch visibly rotted on the rafters; and the walls were stained with splashes of unwholesome green. The rooms were small, the ceilings low, the furniture merely nominal; a strange chill and a haunting smell of damp pervaded the kitchen; and the bedroom boasted only of one bed.

Morris, with a view to cheapening the place, remarked on this defect.

'Well,' returned the man, 'if you can't sleep two abed, you'd better take a villa residence.'

'And then,' pursued Morris, 'there's no water. How do you get your water?'

'We fill *that* from the spring,' replied the carpenter, pointing to a big barrel that stood beside the door. 'The spring ain't so *very* far off, after all,

and it 's easy brought in buckets. There 's a bucket there.'

Morris nudged his brother as they examined the water-butt. It was new, and very solidly constructed for its office. If anything had been wanting to decide them, this eminently practical barrel would have turned the scale. A bargain was promptly struck, the month's rent was paid upon the nail, and about an hour later Finsbury brothers might have been observed returning to the blighted cottage, having along with them the key, which was the symbol of their tenancy, a spirit-lamp, with which they fondly told themselves they would be able to cook, a pork pie of suitable dimensions, and a quart of the worst whisky in Hampshire. Nor was this all they had effected; already (under the plea that they were landscape-painters) they had hired for dawn on the morrow a light but solid two-wheeled cart; so that when they entered in their new character, they were able to tell themselves that the back of the business was already broken.

John proceeded to get tea; while Morris, foraging about the house, was presently delighted by discovering the lid of the water-butt upon the kitchen shelf. Here, then, was the packing-case complete; in the absence of straw, the blankets (which he himself, at least, had not the smallest intention of using for their present purpose) would exactly take the place of packing; and Morris, as the difficulties began to vanish from his path, rose almost to the brink of exultation. There was, however, one diffi-

culty not yet faced, one upon which his whole scheme depended. Would John consent to remain alone in the cottage? He had not yet dared to put the question.

It was with high good-humour that the pair sat down to the deal table, and proceeded to fall-to on the pork-pie. Morris retailed the discovery of the lid, and the Great Vance was pleased to applaud by beating on the table with his fork in true music-hall style.

'That's the dodge,' he cried. 'I always said a water-butt was what you wanted for this business.'

'Of course,' said Morris, thinking this a favourable opportunity to prepare his brother, 'of course you must stay on in this place till I give the word; I'll give out that uncle is resting in the New Forest. It would not do for both of us to appear in London; we could never conceal the absence of the old man.'

John's jaw dropped.

'O, come!' he cried. 'You can stay in this hole yourself. I won't.'

The colour came into Morris's cheeks. He saw that he must win his brother at any cost.

'You must please remember, Johnny,' he said, 'the amount of the tontine. If I succeed, we shall have each fifty thousand to place to our bank account; ay, and nearer sixty.'

'But if you fail,' returned John, 'what then? What'll be the colour of our bank account in that case?'

'I will pay all expenses,' said Morris, with an inward struggle; 'you shall lose nothing.'

'Well,' said John, with a laugh, 'if the ex-s are yours, and half-profits mine, I don't mind remaining here for a couple of days.'

'A couple of days!' cried Morris, who was beginning to get angry and controlled himself with difficulty; 'why, you would do more to win five pounds on a horse-race!'

'Perhaps I would,' returned the Great Vance; 'it's the artistic temperament.'

'This is monstrous!' burst out Morris. 'I take all risks; I pay all expenses; I divide profits; and you won't take the slightest pains to help me. It's not decent; it's not honest; it's not even kind.'

'But suppose,' objected John, who was considerably impressed by his brother's vehemence, 'suppose that Uncle Masterman is alive after all, and lives ten years longer; must I rot here all that time?'

'Of course not,' responded Morris, in a more conciliatory tone; 'I only ask a month at the outside; and if Uncle Masterman is not dead by that time you can go abroad.'

'Go abroad?' repeated John eagerly. 'Why shouldn't I go at once? Tell 'em that Joseph and I are seeing life in Paris.'

'Nonsense,' said Morris.

'Well, but look here,' said John; 'it's this house, it's such a pig-sty, it's so dreary and damp. You said yourself that it was damp.'

'Only to the carpenter,' Morris distinguished,

'and that was to reduce the rent. But really, you know, now we 're in it, I 've seen worse.'

'And what am I to do?' complained the victim. 'How can I entertain a friend?'

'My dear Johnny, if you don't think the tontine worth a little trouble, say so, and I 'll give the business up.'

'You 're dead certain of the figures, I suppose?' asked John. 'Well'—with a deep sigh—'send me the *Pink Un* and all the comic papers regularly. I 'll face the music.'

As afternoon drew on, the cottage breathed more thrillingly of its native marsh; a creeping chill inhabited its chambers; the fire smoked, and a shower of rain, coming up from the channel on a slant of wind, tingled on the window-panes. At intervals, when the gloom deepened toward despair, Morris would produce the whisky-bottle, and at first John welcomed the diversion—not for long. It has been said this spirit was the worst in Hampshire; only those acquainted with the county can appreciate the force of that superlative; and at length even the Great Vance (who was no connoisseur) waved the decoction from his lips. The approach of dusk, feebly combated with a single tallow-candle, added a touch of tragedy; and John suddenly stopped whistling through his fingers—an art to the practice of which he had been reduced — and bitterly lamented his concessions.

'I can't stay here a month,' he cried. 'No one could. The thing 's nonsense, Morris. The parties

that lived in the Bastille would rise against a place like this.'

With an admirable affectation of indifference, Morris proposed a game of pitch-and-toss. To what will not the diplomatist condescend! It was John's favourite game; indeed his only game—he had found all the rest too intellectual—and he played it with equal skill and good fortune. To Morris himself, on the other hand, the whole business was detestable; he was a bad pitcher, he had no luck in tossing, and he was one who suffered torments when he lost. But John was in a dangerous humour, and his brother was prepared for any sacrifice.

By seven o'clock, Morris, with incredible agony, had lost a couple of half-crowns. Even with the tontine before his eyes, this was as much as he could bear; and, remarking that he would take his revenge some other time, he proposed a bit of supper and a grog.

Before they had made an end of this refreshment it was time to be at work. A bucket of water for present necessities was withdrawn from the water-butt, which was then emptied and rolled before the kitchen fire to dry; and the two brothers set forth on their adventure under a starless heaven.

CHAPTER III

THE LECTURER AT LARGE

WHETHER mankind is really partial to happiness is an open question. Not a month passes by but some cherished son runs off into the merchant service, or some valued husband decamps to Texas with a lady help; clergymen have fled from their parishioners; and even judges have been known to retire. To an open mind, it will appear (upon the whole) less strange that Joseph Finsbury should have been led to entertain ideas of escape. His lot (I think we may say) was not a happy one. My friend, Mr. Morris, with whom I travel up twice or thrice a week from Snaresbrook Park, is certainly a gentleman whom I esteem; but he was scarce a model nephew. As for John, he is of course an excellent fellow; but if he was the only link that bound one to a home, I think the most of us would vote for foreign travel. In the case of Joseph, John (if he were a link at all) was not the only one; endearing bonds had long enchained the old gentleman to Bloomsbury; and by these expressions I do not in the least refer to Julia Hazeltine (of whom, however, he was fond enough), but to that collection of manuscript note-books in which his life lay buried. That he should ever have made up his mind to separate himself from these collections, and go forth upon the world with no other resources than his

memory supplied, is a circumstance highly pathetic in itself, and but little creditable to the wisdom of his nephews.

The design, or at least the temptation, was already some months old; and when a bill for eight hundred pounds, payable to himself, was suddenly placed in Joseph's hand, it brought matters to an issue. He retained that bill, which, to one of his frugality, meant wealth; and he promised himself to disappear among the crowds at Waterloo, or (if that should prove impossible) to slink out of the house in the course of the evening and melt like a dream into the millions of London. By a peculiar interposition of providence and railway mismanagement he had not so long to wait.

He was one of the first to come to himself and scramble to his feet after the Browndean catastrophe, and he had no sooner remarked his prostrate nephews than he understood his opportunity and fled. A man of upwards of seventy, who has just met with a railway accident, and who is cumbered besides with the full uniform of Sir Faraday Bond, is not very likely to flee far, but the wood was close at hand and offered the fugitive at least a temporary covert. Hither, then, the old gentleman skipped with extraordinary expedition, and, being somewhat winded and a good deal shaken, here he lay down in a convenient grove and was presently overwhelmed by slumber. The way of fate is often highly entertaining to the looker-on, and it is certainly a pleasant circumstance, that while Morris

and John were delving in the sand to conceal the body of a total stranger, their uncle lay in dreamless sleep a few hundred yards deeper in the wood.

He was awakened by the jolly note of a bugle from the neighbouring high road, where a char-à-banc was bowling by with some belated tourists. The sound cheered his old heart, it directed his steps into the bargain, and soon he was on the highway, looking east and west from under his visor, and doubtfully revolving what he ought to do. A deliberate sound of wheels arose in the distance, and then a cart was seen approaching, well filled with parcels, driven by a good-natured looking man on a double bench, and displaying on a board the legend, 'I. Chandler, carrier.' In the infamously prosaic mind of Mr. Finsbury, certain streaks of poetry survived and were still efficient; they had carried him to Asia Minor as a giddy youth of forty, and now, in the first hours of his recovered freedom, they suggested to him the idea of continuing his flight in Mr. Chandler's cart. It would be cheap; properly broached, it might even cost nothing, and, after years of mittens and hygienic flannel, his heart leaped out to meet the notion of exposure.

Mr. Chandler was perhaps a little puzzled to find so old a gentleman, so strangely clothed, and begging for a lift on so retired a roadside. But he was a good-natured man, glad to do a service, and so he took the stranger up; and he had his own idea of civility, and so he asked no questions. Silence, in

fact, was quite good enough for Mr. Chandler; but the cart had scarcely begun to move forward ere he found himself involved in a one-sided conversation.

'I can see,' began Mr. Finsbury, 'by the mixture of parcels and boxes that are contained in your cart, each marked with its individual label, and by the good Flemish mare you drive, that you occupy the post of carrier in that great English system of transport which, with all its defects, is the pride of our country.'

'Yes, sir,' returned Mr. Chandler vaguely, for he hardly knew what to reply; 'them parcels posts has done us carriers a world of harm.'

'I am not a prejudiced man,' continued Joseph Finsbury. 'As a young man I travelled much. Nothing was too small or too obscure for me to acquire. At sea I studied seamanship, learned the complicated knots employed by mariners, and acquired the technical terms. At Naples, I would learn the art of making macaroni; at Nice, the principles of making candied fruit. I never went to the opera without first buying the book of the piece, and making myself acquainted with the principal airs by picking them out on the piano with one finger.'

'You must have seen a deal, sir,' remarked the carrier, touching up his horse; 'I wish I could have had your advantages.'

'Do you know how often the word whip occurs in the Old Testament?' continued the old gentleman. 'One hundred and (if I remember exactly) forty-seven times.'

'Do it indeed, sir?' said Mr. Chandler. 'I never should have thought it.'

'The Bible contains three million five hundred and one thousand two hundred and forty-nine letters. Of verses I believe there are upward of eighteen thousand. There have been many editions of the Bible; Wiclif was the first to introduce it into England about the year 1300. The 'Paragraph Bible,' as it is called, is a well-known edition, and is so called because it is divided into paragraphs. The 'Breeches Bible' is another well-known instance, and gets its name either because it was printed by one Breeches, or because the place of publication bore that name.'

The carrier remarked drily that he thought that was only natural, and turned his attention to the more congenial task of passing a cart of hay; it was a matter of some difficulty, for the road was narrow, and there was a ditch on either hand.

'I perceive,' began Mr. Finsbury, when they had successfully passed the cart, 'that you hold your reins with one hand; you should employ two.'

'Well, I like that!' cried the carrier contemptuously. 'Why?'

'You do not understand,' continued Mr. Finsbury. 'What I tell you is a scientific fact, and reposes on the theory of the lever, a branch of mechanics. There are some very interesting little shilling books upon the field of study, which I should think a man in your station would take a pleasure to read. But I am afraid you have not cultivated the art of obser-

vation; at least we have now driven together for some time, and I cannot remember that you have contributed a single fact. This is a very false principle, my good man. For instance, I do not know if you observed that (as you passed the hay-cart man) you took your left?'

'Of course I did,' cried the carrier, who was now getting belligerent; 'he'd have the law on me if I hadn't.'

'In France, now,' resumed the old man, 'and also, I believe, in the United States of America, you would have taken the right.'

'I would not,' cried Mr. Chandler indignantly. 'I would have taken the left.'

'I observe,' again continued Mr. Finsbury, scorning to reply, 'that you mend the dilapidated parts of your harness with string. I have always protested against this carelessness and slovenliness of the English poor. In an essay that I once read before an appreciative audience——'

'It ain't string,' said the carrier sullenly, 'it's packthread.'

'I have always protested,' resumed the old man, 'that in their private and domestic life, as well as in their labouring career, the lower classes of this country are improvident, thriftless, and extravagant. A stitch in time——'

'Who the devil *are* the lower classes?' cried the carrier. 'You are the lower classes yourself! If I thought you were a blooming aristocrat, I shouldn't have given you a lift.'

The words were uttered with undisguised ill-feeling; it was plain the pair were not congenial, and further conversation, even to one of Mr. Finsbury's pathetic loquacity, was out of the question. With an angry gesture he pulled down the brim of the forage-cap over his eyes, and, producing a note-book and a blue pencil from one of his innermost pockets, soon became absorbed in calculations.

On his part the carrier fell to whistling with fresh zest; and if (now and again) he glanced at the companion of his drive, it was with mingled feelings of triumph and alarm—triumph because he had succeeded in arresting that prodigy of speech, and alarm lest (by any accident) it should begin again. Even the shower, which presently overtook and passed them, was endured by both in silence; and it was still in silence that they drove at length into Southampton.

Dusk had fallen; the shop windows glimmered forth into the streets of the old seaport; in private houses lights were kindled for the evening meal; and Mr. Finsbury began to think complacently of his night's lodging. He put his papers by, cleared his throat, and looked doubtfully at Mr. Chandler.

'Will you be civil enough,' said he, 'to recommend me to an inn?'

Mr. Chandler pondered for a moment.

'Well,' he said at last, 'I wonder how about the "Tregonwell Arms."'

'The "Tregonwell Arms" will do very well,

returned the old man, 'if it's clean and cheap, and the people civil.'

'I wasn't thinking so much of you,' returned Mr. Chandler thoughtfully. 'I was thinking of my friend Watts as keeps the 'ouse; he's a friend of mine, you see, and he helped me through my trouble last year. And I was thinking, would it be fair-like on Watts to saddle him with an old party like you, who might be the death of him with general information. Would it be fair to the 'ouse?' inquired Mr. Chandler, with an air of candid appeal.

'Mark me,' cried the old gentleman with spirit. 'It was kind in you to bring me here for nothing, but it gives you no right to address me in such terms. Here's a shilling for your trouble; and, if you do not choose to set me down at the "Tregonwell Arms," I can find it for myself.'

Chandler was surprised and a little startled; muttering something apologetic, he returned the shilling, drove in silence through several intricate lanes and small streets, drew up at length before the bright windows of an inn, and called loudly for 'Mr. Watts.'

'Is that you, Jem?' cried a hearty voice from the stableyard. 'Come in and warm yourself.'

'I only stopped here,' Mr. Chandler explained, 'to let down an old gent what wants food and lodging. Mind, I warn you agin him; he's worse nor a temperance lecturer.'

Mr. Finsbury dismounted with difficulty, for he was cramped with his long drive, and the shaking

he had received in the accident. The friendly Mr. Watts, in spite of the carter's scarcely agreeable introduction, treated the old gentleman with the utmost courtesy, and led him into the back parlour, where there was a big fire burning in the grate. Presently a table was spread in the same room, and he was invited to seat himself before a stewed fowl—somewhat the worse for having seen service before—and a big pewter mug of ale from the tap.

He rose from supper a giant refreshed; and, changing his seat to be one nearer the fire, began to examine the other guests with an eye to the delights of oratory. There were near a dozen present, all men, and (as Joseph exulted to perceive) all working men. Often already had he seen cause to bless that appetite for disconnected fact and rotatory argument which is so marked a character of the mechanic. But even an audience of working men has to be courted, and there was no man more deeply versed in the necessary arts than Joseph Finsbury. He placed his glasses on his nose, drew from his pocket a bundle of papers, and spread them before him on a table. He crumpled them, he smoothed them out; now he skimmed them over, apparently well pleased with their contents; now, with tapping pencil and contracted brows, he seemed maturely to consider some particular statement. A stealthy glance about the room assured him of the success of his manœuvres; all eyes were turned on the performer, mouths were open, pipes hung suspended; the birds

were charmed. At the same moment the entrance of Mr. Watts afforded him an opportunity.

'I observe,' said he, addressing the landlord, but taking at the same time the whole room into his confidence with an encouraging look, 'I observe that some of these gentlemen are looking with curiosity in my direction; and certainly it is unusual to see any one immersed in literary and scientific labours in the public apartment of an inn. I have here some calculations I made this morning upon the cost of living in this and other countries—a subject, I need scarcely say, highly interesting to the working classes. I have calculated a scale of living for incomes of eighty, one hundred and sixty, two hundred, and two hundred and forty pounds a year. I must confess that the income of eighty pounds has somewhat baffled me, and the others are not so exact as I could wish; for the price of washing varies largely in foreign countries, and the different cokes, coals, and firewoods fluctuate surprisingly. I will read my researches, and I hope you won't scruple to point out to me any little errors that I may have committed either from oversight or ignorance. I will begin, gentlemen, with the income of eighty pounds a year.'

Whereupon the old gentleman, with less compassion than he would have had for brute beasts, delivered himself of all his tedious calculations. As he occasionally gave nine versions of a single income, placing the imaginary person in London, Paris, Bagdad, Spitzbergen, Bassorah, Heligoland, the

Scilly Islands, Brighton, Cincinnati, and Nijni-Novgorod, with an appropriate outfit for each locality, it is no wonder that his hearers look back on that evening as the most tiresome they ever spent.

Long before Mr. Finsbury had reached Nijni-Novgorod with the income of one hundred and sixty pounds, the company had dwindled and faded away to a few old topers and the bored but affable Watts. There was a constant stream of customers from the outer world, but so soon as they were served they drank their liquor quickly, and departed with the utmost celerity for the next public-house.

By the time the young man with two hundred a year was vegetating in the Scilly Islands, Mr. Watts was left alone with the economist; and that imaginary person had scarce commenced life at Brighton before the last of his pursuers desisted from the chase.

Mr. Finsbury slept soundly after the manifold fatigues of the day. He rose late, and, after a good breakfast, ordered the bill. Then it was that he made a discovery which has been made by many others, both before and since: that it is one thing to order your bill, and another to discharge it. The items were moderate and (what does not always follow) the total small; but, after the most sedulous review of all his pockets, one and ninepence-halfpenny appeared to be the total of the old gentleman's available assets. He asked to see Mr. Watts.

'Here is a bill on London for eight hundred

pounds,' said Mr. Finsbury, as that worthy appeared. 'I am afraid, unless you choose to discount it yourself, it may detain me a day or two till I can get it cashed.'

Mr. Watts looked at the bill, turned it over, and dogs-eared it with his fingers. 'It will keep you a day or two?' he said, repeating the old man's words. 'You have no other money with you?'

'Some trifling change,' responded Joseph. 'Nothing to speak of.'

'Then you can send it me; I should be pleased to trust you.'

'To tell the truth,' answered the old gentleman, 'I am more than half inclined to stay; I am in need of funds.'

'If a loan of ten shillings would help you, it is at your service,' responded Watts, with eagerness.

'No, I think I would rather stay,' said the old man, 'and get my bill discounted.'

'You shall not stay in my house,' cried Mr. Watts. 'This is the last time you shall have a bed at the "Tregonwell Arms."'

'I insist upon remaining,' replied Mr. Finsbury, with spirit; 'I remain by Act of Parliament; turn me out if you dare.'

'Then pay your bill,' said Mr. Watts.

'Take that,' cried the old man, tossing him the negotiable bill.

'It is not legal tender,' replied Mr. Watts. 'You must leave my house at once.'

'You cannot appreciate the contempt I feel for

you, Mr. Watts,' said the old gentleman, resigning himself to circumstances. 'But you shall feel it in one way: I refuse to pay my bill.'

'I don't care for your bill,' responded Mr. Watts. 'What I want is your absence.'

'That you shall have!' said the old gentleman, and, taking up his forage-cap as he spoke, he crammed it on his head. 'Perhaps you are too insolent,' he added, 'to inform me of the time of the next London train?'

'It leaves in three-quarters of an hour,' returned the innkeeper with alacrity. 'You can easily catch it.'

Joseph's position was one of considerable weakness. On the one hand, it would have been well to avoid the direct line of railway, since it was there he might expect his nephews to lie in wait for his recapture; on the other, it was highly desirable, it was even strictly needful, to get the bill discounted ere it should be stopped. To London, therefore, he decided to proceed on the first train; and there remained but one point to be considered, how to pay his fare.

Joseph's nails were never clean, he ate almost entirely with his knife. I doubt if you could say he had the manners of a gentleman; but he had better than that, a touch of genuine dignity. Was it from his stay in Asia Minor? Was it from a strain in the Finsbury blood sometimes alluded to by customers? At least, when he presented himself before the station-master, his salaam was truly Oriental, palm-trees appeared to crowd about the little office,

and the simoom or the bulbul—but I leave this image to persons better acquainted with the East. His appearance, besides, was highly in his favour; the uniform of Sir Faraday, however inconvenient and conspicuous, was, at least, a costume in which no swindler could have hoped to prosper; and the exhibition of a valuable watch and a bill for eight hundred pounds completed what deportment had begun. A quarter of an hour later, when the train came up, Mr. Finsbury was introduced to the guard and installed in a first-class compartment, the station-master smilingly assuming all responsibility.

As the old gentleman sat waiting the moment of departure, he was the witness of an incident strangely connected with the fortunes of his house. A packing-case of cyclopean bulk was borne along the platform by some dozen of tottering porters, and ultimately, to the delight of a considerable crowd, hoisted on board the van. It is often the cheering task of the historian to direct attention to the designs and (if it may be reverently said) the artifices of Providence. In the luggage van, as Joseph was borne out of the station of Southampton East upon his way to London, the egg of his romance lay (so to speak) unhatched. The huge packing-case was directed to lie at Waterloo till called for, and addressed to one 'William Dent Pitman'; and the very next article, a goodly barrel jammed into the corner of the van, bore the superscription, 'M. Finsbury, 16 John Street, Bloomsbury. Carriage paid.'

In this juxtaposition the train of powder was

prepared; and there was now wanting only an idle hand to fire it off.

CHAPTER IV

THE MAGISTRATE IN THE LUGGAGE VAN

THE city of Winchester is famed for a cathedral, a bishop—but he was unfortunately killed some years ago while riding—a public school, a considerable assortment of the military, and the deliberate passage of the trains on the London and South-Western line. These and many similar associations would have doubtless crowded on the mind of Joseph Finsbury; but his spirit had at that time flitted from the railway compartment to a heaven of populous lecture-halls and endless oratory. His body, in the meanwhile, lay doubled on the cushions, the forage-cap rakishly tilted back after the fashion of those that lie in wait for nursery-maids, the poor old face quiescent, one arm clutching to his heart *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*.

To him, thus unconscious, enter and exeunt again a pair of voyagers. These two had saved the train and no more. A tandem urged to its last speed, an act of something closely bordering on brigandage at the ticket office, and a spasm of running, had brought them on the platform just as the engine uttered its departing snort. There was but one carriage easily within their reach; and they had sprung into it, and

the leader and elder already had his feet upon the floor, when he observed Mr. Finsbury.

'Good God!' he cried, 'Uncle Joseph! This 'll never do.'

And he backed out, almost upsetting his companion, and once more closed the door upon the sleeping patriarch.

The next moment the pair had jumped into the baggage van.

'What 's the row about your uncle Joseph?' inquired the younger traveller, mopping his brow. 'Does he object to smoking?'

'I don't know that there 's anything the row with him,' returned the other. 'He 's by no means the first comer, my uncle Joseph, I can tell you! Very respectable old gentleman; interested in leather; been to Asia Minor; no family, no assets—and a tongue, my dear Wickham, sharper than a serpent's tooth.'

'Cantankerous old party, eh?' suggested Wickham.

'Not in the least,' cried the other; 'only a man with a solid talent for being a bore; rather cheery, I daresay, on a desert island, but on a railway journey insupportable. You should hear him on Tonti, the ass that started tontines. He 's incredible on Tonti.'

'By Jove!' cried Wickham, 'then you 're one of these Finsbury tontine fellows. I hadn't a guess of that.'

'Ah!' said the other, 'do you know that old boy

in the carriage is worth a hundred thousand pounds to me? There he was asleep, and nobody there but you! But I spared him, because I 'm a Conservative in politics.'

Mr. Wickham, pleased to be in a luggage van, was flitting to and fro like a gentlemanly butterfly.

'By Jingo!' he cried, 'here 's something for you! "M. Finsbury, 16 John Street, Bloomsbury, London." M. stands for Michael, you sly dog; you keep two establishments, do you?'

'O, that 's Morris,' responded Michael from the other end of the van, where he had found a comfortable seat upon some sacks. 'He 's a little cousin of mine. I like him myself, because he 's afraid of me. He 's one of the ornaments of Bloomsbury, and has a collection of some kind—birds' eggs or something that 's supposed to be curious. I bet it 's nothing to my clients!'

'What a lark it would be to play billy with the labels!' chuckled Mr. Wickham. 'By George, here 's a tack-hammer! We might send all these things skipping about the premises like what 's-his name!'

At this moment the guard, surprised by the sound of voices, opened the door of his little cabin.

'You had best step in here, gentlemen,' said he, when he had heard their story.

'Won't you come, Wickham?' asked Michael.

'Catch me—I want to travel in a van,' replied the youth.

And so the door of communication was closed;

and for the rest of the run Mr. Wickham was left alone over his diversions on the one side, and on the other Michael and the guard were closeted together in familiar talk.

'I can get you a compartment here, sir,' observed the official, as the train began to slacken speed before Bishopstoke station. 'You had best get out at my door, and I can bring your friend.'

Mr. Wickham, whom we left (as the reader has shrewdly suspected) beginning to 'play billy' with the labels in the van, was a young gentleman of much wealth, a pleasing but sandy exterior, and a highly vacant mind. Not many months before, he had contrived to get himself blackmailed by the family of a Wallachian Hospodar, resident for political reasons in the gay city of Paris. A common friend (to whom he had confided his distress) recommended him to Michael; and the lawyer was no sooner in possession of the facts than he instantly assumed the offensive, fell on the flank of the Wallachian forces, and, in the inside of three days had the satisfaction to behold them routed and fleeing for the Danube. It is no business of ours to follow them on this retreat, over which the police were so obliging as to preside paternally. Thus relieved from what he loved to refer to as the Bulgarian Atrocity, Mr. Wickham returned to London with the most unbounded and embarrassing gratitude and admiration for his saviour. These sentiments were not repaid either in kind or degree; indeed, Michael was a trifle ashamed of his new

client's friendship; it had taken many invitations to get him to Winchester and Wickham Manor; but he had gone at last, and was now returning. It has been remarked by some judicious thinker (possibly J. F. Smith) that Providence despises to employ no instrument, however humble; and it is now plain to the dullest that both Mr. Wickham and the Wallachian Hospodar were liquid lead and wedges in the hand of Destiny.

Smitten with the desire to shine in Michael's eyes and show himself a person of original humour and resources, the young gentleman (who was a magistrate, more by token, in his native county) was no sooner alone in the van than he fell upon the labels with all the zeal of a reformer; and, when he rejoined the lawyer at Bishopstoke, his face was flushed with his exertions, and his cigar, which he had suffered to go out, was almost bitten in two.

'By George, but this has been a lark!' he cried. 'I 've sent the wrong thing to everybody in England. These cousins of yours have a packing-case as big as a house. I 've muddled the whole business up to that extent, Finsbury, that if it were to get out it 's my belief we should get lynched.'

It was useless to be serious with Mr. Wickham. 'Take care,' said Michael. 'I am getting tired of your perpetual scrapes; my reputation is beginning to suffer.'

'Your reputation will be all gone before you finish with me,' replied his companion with a grin. 'Clap it in the bill, my boy. "For total loss of

reputation, six and eightpence." But,' continued Mr. Wickham with more seriousness, 'could I be bowled out of the Commission for this little jest? I know it's small, but I like to be a J.P. Speaking as a professional man, do you think there's any risk?'

'What does it matter?' responded Michael, 'they'll chuck you out sooner or later. Somehow you don't give the effect of being a good magistrate.'

'I only wish I was a solicitor,' retorted his companion, 'instead of a poor devil of a country gentleman. Suppose we start one of those tontine affairs ourselves; I to pay five hundred a year, and you to guarantee me against every misfortune except illness or marriage.'

'It strikes me,' remarked the lawyer with a meditative laugh, as he lighted a cigar, 'it strikes me that you must be a cursed nuisance in this world of ours.'

'Do you really think so, Finsbury?' responded the magistrate, leaning back in his cushions, delighted with the compliment. 'Yes, I suppose I am a nuisance. But, mind you, I have a stake in the country: don't forget that, dear boy.'

CHAPTER V

MR. GIDEON FORSYTH AND THE GIGANTIC BOX

It has been mentioned that at Bournemouth Julia sometimes made acquaintances; it is true she had

but a glimpse of them before the doors of John Street closed again upon its captives, but the glimpse was sometimes exhilarating, and the consequent regret was tempered with hope. Among those whom she had thus met a year before was a young barrister of the name of Gideon Forsyth.

About three o'clock of the eventful day when the magistrate tampered with the labels, a somewhat moody and distempered ramble had carried Mr. Forsyth to the corner of John Street; and about the same moment Miss Hazeltine was called to the door of No. 16 by a thundering double knock.

Mr. Gideon Forsyth was a happy enough young man; he would have been happier if he had had more money and less uncle. One hundred and twenty pounds a year was all his store; but his uncle, Mr. Edward Hugh Bloomfield, supplemented this with a handsome allowance and a great deal of advice, couched in language that would probably have been judged intemperate on board a pirate ship. Mr. Bloomfield was indeed a figure quite peculiar to the days of Mr. Gladstone; what we may call (for the lack of an accepted expression) a Squirradical. Having acquired years without experience, he carried into the Radical side of politics those noisy, after-dinner-table passions, which we are more accustomed to connect with Toryism in its severe and senile aspects. To the opinions of Mr. Bradlaugh, in fact, he added the temper and the sympathies of that extinct animal, the Squire; he admired pugilism, he carried a formidable oaken

staff, he was a reverent churchman, and it was hard to know which would have more volcanically stirred his choler—a person who should have defended the established church, or one who should have neglected to attend its celebrations. He had besides some levelling catchwords, justly dreaded in the family circle; and when he could not go so far as to declare a step un-English, he might still (and with hardly less effect) denounce it as unpractical. It was under the ban of this lesser excommunication that Gideon had fallen. His views on the study of law had been pronounced unpractical; and it had been intimated to him, in a vociferous interview punctuated with the oaken staff, that he must either take a new start and get a brief or two, or prepare to live on his own money.

No wonder if Gideon was moody. He had not the slightest wish to modify his present habits; but he would not stand on that, since the recall of Mr. Bloomfield's allowance would revolutionise them still more radically. He had not the least desire to acquaint himself with law; he had looked into it already, and it seemed not to repay attention; but upon this also he was ready to give way. In fact, he would go as far as he could to meet the views of his uncle, the Squirradical. But there was one part of the programme that appeared independent of his will. How to get a brief? there was the question. And there was another and a worse. Suppose he got one, should he prove the better man?

Suddenly he found his way barred by a crowd.

A garishly illuminated van was backed against the kerb; from its open stern, half resting on the street, half supported by some glistening athletes, the end of the largest packing-case in the county of Middlesex might have been seen protruding; while, on the steps of the house, the burly person of the driver and the slim figure of a young girl stood as upon a stage, disputing.

'It is not for us,' the girl was saying. 'I beg you to take it away; it couldn't get into the house, even if you managed to get it out of the van.'

'I shall leave it on the pavement, then, and M. Finsbury can arrange with the Vestry as he likes,' said the vanman.

'But I am not M. Finsbury,' expostulated the girl.

'It doesn't matter who you are,' said the vanman.

'You must allow me to help you, Miss Hazeltine,' said Gideon, putting out his hand.

Julia gave a little cry of pleasure. 'O, Mr. Forsyth,' she cried, 'I am so glad to see you; we must get this horrid thing, which can only have come here by mistake, into the house. The man says we 'll have to take off the door, or knock two of our windows into one, or be fined by the Vestry or Custom House or something for leaving our parcels on the pavement.'

The men by this time had successfully removed the box from the van, had plumped it down on the pavement, and now stood leaning against it, or gazing at the door of No. 16, in visible physical

distress and mental embarrassment. The windows of the whole street had filled, as if by magic, with interested and entertained spectators.

With as thoughtful and scientific an expression as he could assume, Gideon measured the doorway with his cane, while Julia entered his observations in a drawing-book. He then measured the box, and, upon comparing his data, found that there was just enough space for it to enter. Next, throwing off his coat and waistcoat, he assisted the men to take the door from its hinges. And lastly, all bystanders being pressed into the service, the packing-case mounted the steps upon some fifteen pairs of wavering legs — scraped, loudly grinding, through the doorway—and was deposited at length with a formidable convulsion, in the far end of the lobby, which it almost blocked. The artisans of this victory smiled upon each other as the dust subsided. It was true they had smashed a bust of Apollo and ploughed the wall into deep ruts; but, at least, they were no longer one of the public spectacles of London.

'Well, sir,' said the vanman, 'I never see such a job.'

Gideon eloquently expressed his concurrence in this sentiment by pressing a couple of sovereigns in the man's hand.

'Make it three, sir, and I'll stand Sam to everybody here!' cried the latter; and, this having been done, the whole body of volunteer porters swarmed into the van, which drove off in the direction of

the nearest reliable public-house. Gideon closed the door on their departure, and turned to Julia; their eyes met; the most uncontrollable mirth seized upon them both, and they made the house ring with their laughter. Then curiosity awoke in Julia's mind, and she went and examined the box, and more especially the label.

'This is the strangest thing that ever happened,' she said, with another burst of laughter. 'It is certainly Morris's handwriting, and I had a letter from him only this morning, telling me to expect a barrel. Is there a barrel coming too, do you think, Mr. Forsyth?'

'Statuary with Care, Fragile,' read Gideon aloud from the painted warning on the box. 'Then you were told nothing about this?'

'No,' responded Julia. 'O, Mr. Forsyth, don't you think we might take a peep at it?'

'Yes, indeed,' cried Gideon. 'Just let me have a hammer.'

'Come down, and I'll show you where it is,' cried Julia, 'the shelf is too high for me to reach; and, opening the door of the kitchen stair, she bade Gideon follow her. They found both the hammer and a chisel; but Gideon was surprised to see no sign of a servant. He also discovered that Miss Hazeltine had a very pretty little foot and ankle; and the discovery embarrassed him so much that he was glad to fall at once upon the packing-case.

He worked hard and earnestly, and dealt his blows with the precision of a blacksmith; Julia the

while standing silently by his side, and regarding rather the workman than the work. He was a handsome fellow, she told herself she had never seen such beautiful arms. And suddenly, as though he had overheard these thoughts, Gideon turned and smiled to her. She, too, smiled and coloured; and the double change became her so prettily that Gideon forgot to turn away his eyes, and, swinging the hammer with a will, discharged a smashing blow on his own knuckles. With admirable presence of mind he crushed down an oath and substituted the harmless comment, 'butter fingers!' But the pain was sharp, his nerve was shaken, and after an abortive trial he found he must desist from further operations.

In a moment Julia was off to the pantry, in a moment she was back again with a basin of water and a sponge, and had begun to bathe his wounded hand.

'I am dreadfully sorry,' said Gideon apologetically. 'If I had had any manners I should have opened the box first, and smashed my hand afterward. It feels much better,' he added. 'I assure you it does.'

'And now I think you are well enough to direct operations,' said she. 'Tell me what to do, and I 'll be your workman.'

'A very pretty workman,' said Gideon, rather forgetting himself. She turned and looked at him, with a suspicion of a frown; and the indiscreet young man was glad to direct her attention to the

packing-case. The bulk of the work had been accomplished; and presently Julia had burst through the last barrier and disclosed a zone of straw. In a moment they were kneeling side by side, engaged like hay-makers; the next they were rewarded with a glimpse of something white and polished; and the next again laid bare an unmistakable marble leg.

'He is surely a very athletic person,' said Julia.

'I never saw anything like it,' responded Gideon. 'His muscles stand out like penny rolls.'

Another leg was soon disclosed, and then what seemed to be a third. This resolved itself, however, into a knotted club resting upon a pedestal.

'It is a Hercules,' cried Gideon; 'I might have guessed that from his calf. I 'm supposed to be rather partial to statuary, but when it comes to Hercules, the police should interfere. I should say,' he added, glancing with disaffection at the swollen leg, 'that this was about the biggest and the worst in Europe. What in heaven's name can have induced him to come here?'

'I suppose nobody else would have a gift of him,' said Julia. 'And for that matter, I think we could have done without the monster very well.'

'O, don't say that,' returned Gideon. 'This has been one of the most amusing experiences of my life.'

'I don't think you 'll forget it very soon,' said Julia. 'Your hand will remind you.'

'Well, I suppose I must be going,' said Gideon reluctantly.

'No,' pleaded Julia. 'Why should you? Stay and have tea with me.'

'If I thought you really wished me to stay,' said Gideon, looking at his hat, 'of course I should only be too delighted.'

'What a silly person you must take me for!' returned the girl. 'Why, of course I do; and besides I want some cakes for tea, and I've nobody to send. Here is the latch-key.'

Gideon put on his hat with alacrity, and casting one look at Miss Hazeltine, and another at the legs of Hercules, threw open the door and departed on his errand.

He returned with a large bag of the choicest and most tempting of cakes and tartlets, and found Julia in the act of spreading a small tea-table in the lobby.

'The rooms are all in such a state,' she cried, 'that I thought we should be more cozy and comfortable in our own lobby, and under our own vine and statuary.

'Ever so much better,' cried Gideon delightedly.

'O what adorable cream tarts!' said Julia, opening the bag, 'and the dearest little little cherry tartlets, with all the cherries spilled out into the cream.'

'Yes,' said Gideon, concealing his dismay, 'I knew they would mix beautifully; the woman behind the counter told me so.'

'Now,' said Julia, as they began their little festival, 'I am going to show you Morris's letter; read

it aloud, please; perhaps there's something I have missed.'

Gideon took the letter, and spreading it out on his knee, read as follows:—

'DEAR JULIA,—I write you from Browndean, where we are stopping over for a few days. Uncle was much shaken in that dreadful accident, of which, I daresay, you have seen the account. To-morrow I leave him here with John, and come up alone; but before that, you will have received a barrel *containing specimens for a friend.* Do not open it on any account, but leave it in the lobby till I come.—Yours in haste,

'M. FINSBURY.

'*P.S.*—Be sure and leave the barrel in the lobby.'

'No,' said Gideon, 'there seems to be nothing about the monument,' and he nodded, as he spoke, at the marble legs. 'Miss Hazeltine,' he continued, 'would you mind me asking a few questions?'

'Certainly not,' replied Julia; 'and if you can make me understand why Morris has sent a statue of Hercules instead of a barrel containing specimens for a friend, I shall be grateful till my dying day. And what are specimens for a friend?'

'I haven't a guess,' said Gideon. 'Specimens are usually bits of stone, but rather smaller than our friend the monument. Still, that is not the point. Are you quite alone in this big house?'

'Yes, I am at present,' returned Julia. 'I came up before them to prepare the house, and get another servant. But I couldn't get one I liked.'

'Then you are utterly alone,' said Gideon in amazement. 'Are you not afraid?'

'No,' responded Julia stoutly. 'I don't see why I should be more afraid than you would be; I am weaker, of course, but when I found I must sleep alone in the house I bought a revolver wonderfully cheap, and made the man show me how to use it.'

'And how do you use it?' demanded Gideon, much amused at her courage.

'Why,' said she, with a smile, 'you pull a little trigger thing on top, and then pointing it very low, for it springs up as you fire, you pull the underneath little trigger thing, and it goes off as well as if a man had done it.'

'And how often have you used it?' asked Gideon.

'O, I have not used it yet,' said the determined young lady; 'but I know how, and that makes me wonderfully courageous, especially when I barricade my door with a chest of drawers.'

'I'm awfully glad they are coming back soon,' said Gideon. 'This business strikes me as excessively unsafe; if it goes on much longer, I could provide you with a maiden aunt of mine, or my landlady, if you preferred.'

'Lend me an aunt!' cried Julia. 'O what generosity! I begin to think it must have been you that sent the Hercules.'

'Believe me,' cried the young man, 'I admire you too much to send you such an infamous work of art.'

Julia was beginning to reply, when they were both startled by a knocking at the door.

'O, Mr. Forsyth!'

'Don't be afraid, my dear girl,' said Gideon, laying his hand tenderly on her arm.

'I know it's the police,' she whispered. 'They are coming to complain about the statue.'

The knock was repeated. It was louder than before, and more impatient.

'It's Morris,' cried Julia in a startled voice, and she ran to the door and opened it.

It was indeed Morris that stood before them; not the Morris of ordinary days, but a wild-looking fellow, pale and haggard, with blood-shot eyes, and a two-days' beard upon his chin.

'The barrel!' he cried. 'Where's the barrel that came this morning?' and he stared about the lobby, his eyes, as they fell upon the legs of Hercules, literally goggling in his head. 'What is that?' he screamed. 'What is that waxwork? Speak, you fool! What is that? and where's the barrel—the water-butt?'

'No barrel came, Morris,' responded Julia coldly. 'This is the only thing that has arrived.'

'This!' shrieked the miserable man. 'I never heard of it!'

'It came addressed in your hand,' replied Julia; 'we had nearly to pull the house down to get it in, and that is all that I can tell you.'

Morris gazed at her in utter bewilderment. He passed his hand over his forehead, he leaned against the wall like a man about to faint. Then his tongue was loosed, and he overwhelmed the girl with torrents of abuse. Such fire, such directness, such a choice of ungentlemanly language, none had

ever before suspected Morris to possess; and the girl trembled and shrank before his fury.

'You shall not speak to Miss Hazeltine in that way,' said Gideon sternly. 'It is what I will not suffer.'

'I shall speak to the girl as I like,' returned Morris, with a fresh outburst of anger. 'I'll speak to the hussy as she deserves.'

'Not a word more, sir, not one word,' cried Gideon.—'Miss Hazeltine,' he continued, addressing the young girl, 'you cannot stay a moment longer in the same house with this unmanly fellow. Here is my arm, let me take you where you will be secure from insult.'

'Mr. Forsyth,' returned Julia, 'you are right; I cannot stay here longer, and I am sure I trust myself to an honourable gentleman.'

Pale and resolute, Gideon offered her his arm, and the pair descended the steps, followed by Morris clamouring for the latch-key.

Julia had scarcely handed the key to Morris before an empty hansom drove smartly into John Street. It was hailed by both men, and as the cabman drew up his restive horse, Morris made a dash into the vehicle.

'Sixpence above fare,' he cried recklessly. 'Waterloo Station for your life. Sixpence for yourself!'

'Make it a shilling, guv'ner,' said the man, with a grin, 'the other parties were first.'

'A shilling then,' cried Morris, with the inward

reflection that he would reconsider it at Waterloo. The man whipped up his horse, and the hansom vanished from John Street.

CHAPTER VI

THE TRIBULATIONS OF MORRIS
PART THE FIRST

As the hansom span through the streets of London, Morris sought to rally the forces of his mind. The water-butt with the dead body had miscarried, and it was essential to recover it. So much was clear; and if, by some blest good fortune, it was still at the station, all might be well. If it had been sent out, however, if it were already in the hands of some wrong person, matters looked more ominous. People who receive unexplained packages are usually keen to have them open; the example of Miss Hazeltine (whom he cursed again) was there to remind him of the circumstance; and if any one had opened the water-butt—'O Lord,' cried Morris at the thought, and carried his hand to his damp forehead. The private conception of any breach of law is apt to be inspiriting, for the scheme (while yet inchoate) wears dashing and attractive colours. Not so in the least that part of the criminal's later reflections which deal with the police. That useful corps (as Morris now began to think) had scarce been kept sufficiently in view when he embarked upon his enterprise. 'I must play devilish close,' he reflected, and he was

aware of an exquisite thrill of fear in the region of the spine.

'Main line or loop?' inquired the cabman, through the scuttle.

'Main line,' replied Morris, and mentally decided that the man should have his shilling after all. 'It would be madness to attract attention,' thought he. 'But what this thing will cost me, first and last, begins to be a nightmare!'

He passed through the booking office and wandered disconsolately on the platform. It was a breathing-space in the day's traffic; there were few people there, and these for the most part quiescent on the benches. Morris seemed to attract no remark, which was a good thing; but, on the other hand, he was making no progress in his quest. Something must be done, something must be risked; every passing instant only added to his dangers. Summoning all his courage, he stopped a porter, and asked him if he remembered receiving a barrel by the morning train; he was anxious to get information, for the barrel belonged to a friend. 'It is a matter of some moment,' he added, 'for it contains specimens.'

'I was not here this morning, sir,' responded the porter, somewhat reluctantly, 'but I'll ask Bill. —Do you recollect, Bill, to have got a barrel from Bournemouth this morning containing specimens?'

'I don't know about specimens,' replied Bill; 'but the party as received the barrel I mean raised a sight of trouble.'

'What's that?' cried Morris, in the agitation of the moment, pressing a penny into the man's hand.

'You see, sir, the barrel arrived at one-thirty; no one claimed it till about three, when a small, sickly-looking gentleman (probably a curate) came up, and sez he, "Have you got anything for Pitman," or "Will'm Bent Pitman," if I recollect right. "I don't exactly know," sez I, "but I rather fancy that there barrel bears that name." The little man went up to the barrel, and seemed regularly all took aback when he saw the address, and then he pitched into us for not having brought what he wanted. "I don't care a damn what you want," sez I to him, "but if you are Will'm Bent Pitman, there's your barrel."'

'Well, and did he take it?' cried the breathless Morris.

'Well, sir,' returned Bill, 'it appears it was a packing-case he was after. The packing-case came; that's sure enough, because it was about the biggest packing-case ever I clapped eyes on. And this Pitman he seemed a good deal cut up, and he had the superintendent out, and they got hold of the vanman—him as took the packing-case. Well, sir,' continued Bill, with a smile, 'I never see a man in such a state; everybody about that van was mortal, bar the horses. Some gen'leman (as well as I could make out) had given the vanman a sov.; and so that was where the trouble come in, you see.'

'But what did he say?' gasped Morris.

'I don't know as he *said* much, sir,' said Bill. 'But he offered to fight this Pitman for a pot of

beer. He had lost his book, too, and the receipts: and his men were all as mortal as himself. O, they were all like—' and Bill paused for a simile—'like lords! the superintendent sacked them on the spot.'

'O, come, but that's not so bad,' said Morris, with a bursting sigh. 'He couldn't tell where he took the packing-case, then?'

'Not he,' said Bill, 'nor yet nothink else.'

'And what—what did Pitman do?' asked Morris.

'O, he went off with the barrel in a four-wheeler, very trembling like,' replied Bill. 'I don't believe he's a gentleman as has good health.'

'Well, so the barrel's gone,' said Morris, half to himself.

'You may depend on that, sir,' returned the porter. 'But you had better see the superintendent.'

'Not in the least, it's of no account,' said Morris. 'It only contained specimens.' And he walked hastily away.

Ensconced once more in a hansom, he proceeded to reconsider his position. Suppose (he thought), suppose he should accept defeat and declare his uncle's death at once? He should lose the tontine, and with that the last hope of his seven thousand eight hundred pounds. But on the other hand, since the shilling to the hansom cabman, he had begun to see that crime was expensive in its course, and, since the loss of the water-butt, that it was uncertain in its consequences. Quietly at first, and then with growing heat, he reviewed the advantages of backing out. It involved a loss; but (come to think of it)

no such great loss after all; only that of the tontine, which had been always a toss-up, which at bottom he had never really expected. He reminded himself of that eagerly; he congratulated himself upon his constant moderation. He had never really expected the tontine; he had never even very definitely hoped to recover his seven thousand eight hundred pounds; he had been hurried into the whole thing by Michael's obvious dishonesty. Yes, it would probably be better to draw back from this high-flying venture, settle back on the leather business——

'Great God!' cried Morris, bounding in the hansom like a Jack-in-a-box. 'I have not only not gained the tontine—I have lost the leather business!'

Such was the monstrous fact. He had no power to sign; he could not draw a cheque for thirty shillings: until he could produce legal evidence of his uncle's death, he was a penniless outcast—and as soon as he produced it he had lost the tontine! There was no hesitation on the part of Morris; to drop the tontine like a hot chestnut, to concentrate all his forces on the leather business and the rest of his small but legitimate inheritance, was the decision of a single instant. And the next, the full extent of his calamity was suddenly disclosed to him. Declare his uncle's death? He couldn't! Since the body was lost Joseph had (in a legal sense) become immortal.

There was no created vehicle big enough to contain Morris and his woes. He paid the hansom off and walked on he knew not whither.

'I seem to have gone into this business with too much precipitation,' he reflected, with a deadly sigh. 'I fear it seems too ramified for a person of my powers of mind.'

And then a remark of his uncle's flashed into his memory: If you want to think clearly, put it all down on paper. 'Well, the old boy knew a thing or two,' said Morris. 'I will try; but I don't believe the paper was ever made that will clear my mind.'

He entered a place of public entertainment, ordered bread and cheese, and writing materials, and sat down before them heavily. He tried the pen; it was an excellent pen, but what was he to write? 'I have it!' cried Morris. 'Robinson Crusoe and the double columns!' He prepared his paper after that classic model and began as follows:

Bad.	*Good.*
1. I have lost my uncle's body.	1. But then Pitman has found it.

'Stop a bit,' said Morris, 'I am letting the spirit of antithesis run away with me. Let's start again.'

Bad.	*Good.*
1. I have lost my uncle's body.	1. But then I no longer require to bury it.
2. I have lost the tontine.	2. But I may still save that if Pitman disposes of the body, and if I can find a physician who will stick at nothing.
3. I have lost the leather business, and the rest of my uncle's succession.	3. But not if Pitman gives the body up to the police.

'O, but in that case I go to jail; I had forgot that,' thought Morris. 'Indeed, I don't know that I had better dwell on that hypothesis at all; it's all very well to talk of facing the worst; but in a case of this kind a man's first duty is to his own nerve. Is there any answer to No. 3? Is there any possible good side to such a beastly bungle? There must be, of course, or where would be the use of this double-entry business? And—by George, I have it!' he exclaimed; 'it's exactly the same as the last!' And he hastily re-wrote the passage:

Bad.	*Good.*
3. I have lost the leather business and the rest of my uncle's succession.	3. But not if I can find a physician who will stick at nothing.

'This venal doctor seems quite a desideratum,' he reflected. 'I want him first to give me a certificate that my uncle is dead, so that I may get the leather business; and then that he's alive—but here we are again at the incompatible interests!' And he returned to his tabulation:

Bad.	*Good.*
4. I have almost no money.	4. But there is plenty in the bank.
5. Yes, but I can't get the money in the bank.	5. But — well, that seems unhappily to be the case.
6. I have left the bill for eight hundred pounds in Uncle Joseph's pocket.	6. But if Pitman is only a dishonest man, the presence of this bill may lead him to keep the whole thing dark and throw the body into the New Cut.

7. Yes, but if Pitman is dishonest and finds the bill, he will know who Joseph is, and he may blackmail me.	7. Yes, but if I am right about Uncle Masterman, I can blackmail Michael.
8. But I can't blackmail Michael (which is, besides, a very dangerous thing to do) until I find out.	8. Worse luck !
9. The leather business will soon want money for current expenses, and I have none to give.	9. But the leather business is a sinking ship.
10. Yes, but it 's all the ship I have.	10. A fact.
11. John will soon want money, and I have none to give.	11.
12. And the venal doctor will want money down.	12.
13. And if Pitman is dishonest and don't send me to jail, he will want a fortune.	13.

'O, this seems to be a very one-sided business,' exclaimed Morris. 'There 's not so much in this method as I was led to think.' He crumpled the paper up and threw it down; and then, the next moment, picked it up again and ran it over. 'It seems it 's on the financial point that my position is weakest,' he reflected. 'Is there positively no way of raising the wind? In a vast city like this, and surrounded by all the resources of civilisation, it seems not to be conceived! Let us have no more precipitation. Is there nothing I can sell? My collection of signet——' But at the thought of scattering these loved treasures the blood leaped into Morris's cheek. 'I would rather die!' he exclaimed, and cramming his hat upon his head, strode forth into the streets.

'I *must* raise funds,' he thought. 'My uncle being dead, the money in the bank is mine, or would be mine, but for the cursed injustice that has pursued me ever since I was an orphan in a commercial academy. I know what any other man would do; any other man in Christendom would forge; although I don't know why I call it forging, either, when Joseph's dead, and the funds are my own. When I think of that, when I think that my uncle is really as dead as mutton, and that I can't prove it, my gorge rises at the injustice of the whole affair. I used to feel bitterly about that seven thousand eight hundred pounds; it seems a trifle now! Dear me, why, the day before yesterday I was comparatively happy.'

And Morris stood on the sidewalk and heaved another sobbing sigh.

'Then there's another thing,' he resumed; 'can I? Am I able? Why didn't I practise different handwritings while I was young? How a fellow regrets those lost opportunities when he grows up! But there's one comfort: it's not morally wrong; I can try it on with a clear conscience, and even if I was found out, I wouldn't greatly care—morally, I mean. And then, if I succeed, and if Pitman is staunch—there's nothing to do but find a venal doctor; and that ought to be simple enough in a place like London. By all accounts the town's alive with them. It wouldn't do, of course, to advertise for a corrupt physician; that would be impolitic. No, I suppose a fellow has simply to

spot along the streets for a red lamp and herbs in the window, and then you go in and—and—and put it to him plainly; though it seems a delicate step.'

He was near home now, after many devious wanderings, and turned up John Street. As he thrust his latch-key in the lock, another mortifying reflection struck him to the heart.

'Not even this house is mine till I can prove him dead,' he snarled, and slammed the door behind him so that the windows in the attic rattled.

Night had long fallen; long ago the lamps and the shop-fronts had begun to glitter down the endless streets; the lobby was pitch-dark; and, as the devil would have it, Morris barked his shins and sprawled all his length over the pedestal of Hercules. The pain was sharp; his temper was already thoroughly undermined; by a last misfortune his hand closed on the hammer as he fell; and, in a spasm of childish irritation, he turned and struck at the offending statue. There was a splintering crash.

'O Lord, what have I done next?' wailed Morris; and he groped his way to find a candle. 'Yes,' he reflected, as he stood with the light in his hand and looked upon the mutilated leg, from which about a pound of muscle was detached. 'Yes, I have destroyed a genuine antique; I may be in for thousands!' And then there sprung up in his bosom a sort of angry hope. 'Let me see,' he thought. 'Julia's got rid of; there's nothing

to connect me with that beast Forsyth; the men were all drunk, and (what's better) they've been all discharged. O come, I think this is another case of moral courage! I'll deny all knowledge of the thing.'

A moment more, and he stood again before the Hercules, his lips sternly compressed, the coal-axe and the meat-cleaver under his arm. The next, he had fallen upon the packing-case. This had been already seriously undermined by the operations of Gideon; a few well-directed blows, and it already quaked and gaped; yet a few more, and it fell about Morris in a shower of boards followed by an avalanche of straw.

And now the leather merchant could behold the nature of his task: and at the first sight his spirit quailed. It was, indeed, no more ambitious a task for De Lesseps, with all his men and horses, to attack the hills of Panama, than for a single, slim young gentleman, with no previous experience of labour in a quarry, to measure himself against that bloated monster on his pedestal. And yet the pair were well encountered: on the one side, bulk—on the other, genuine heroic fire.

'Down you shall come, you great big ugly brute!' cried Morris aloud, with something of that passion which swept the Parisian mob against the walls of the Bastille. 'Down you shall come, this night. I'll have none of you in my lobby.'

The face, from its indecent expression, had particularly animated the zeal of our iconoclast; and

it was against the face that he began his operations. The great height of the demigod—for he stood a fathom and half in his stocking-feet—offered a preliminary obstacle to this attack. But here, in the first skirmish of the battle, intellect already began to triumph over matter. By means of a pair of library steps, the injured householder gained a posture of advantage; and, with great swipes of the coal-axe, proceeded to decapitate the brute.

Two hours later, what had been the erect image of a gigantic coal-porter turned miraculously white was now no more than a medley of disjected members; the quadragenarian torso prone against the pedestal; the lascivious countenance leering down the kitchen stair; the legs, the arms, the hands, and even the fingers, scattered broadcast on the lobby floor. Half an hour more, and all the débris had been laboriously carted to the kitchen; and Morris, with a gentle sentiment of triumph, looked round upon the scene of his achievements. Yes, he could deny all knowledge of it now: the lobby, beyond the fact that it was partly ruinous, betrayed no trace of the passage of Hercules. But it was a weary Morris that crept up to bed; his arms and shoulders ached, the palms of his hands burned from the rough kisses of the coal-axe, and there was one smarting finger that stole continually to his mouth. Sleep long delayed to visit the dilapidated hero, and with the first peep of day it had again deserted him.

The morning, as though to accord with his disastrous fortunes, dawned inclemently. An easterly

gale was shouting in the streets; flaws of rain angrily assailed the windows; and as Morris dressed, the draught from the fireplace vividly played about his legs.

'I think,' he could not help observing bitterly, 'that with all I have to bear, they might have given me decent weather.'

There was no bread in the house, for Miss Hazeltine (like all women left to themselves) had subsisted entirely upon cake. But some of this was found, and (along with what the poets call a glass of fair, cold water) made up a semblance of a morning meal, and then down he sat undauntedly to his delicate task.

Nothing can be more interesting than the study of signatures, written (as they are) before meals and after, during indigestion and intoxication; written when the signer is trembling for the life of his child, or has come from winning the Derby, in his lawyer's office, or under the bright eyes of his sweetheart. To the vulgar, these seem never the same; but to the expert, the bank clerk, or the lithographer, they are constant quantities, and as recognisable as the North Star to the night-watch on deck.

To all this Morris was alive. In the theory of that graceful art in which he was now embarking, our spirited leather-merchant was beyond all reproach. But, happily for the investor, forgery is an affair of practice. And as Morris sat surrounded by examples of his uncle's signature and of his own incompetence, insidious depression stole upon his spirits. From time to time the wind wuthered in

the chimney at his back; from time to time there swept over Bloomsbury a squall so dark that he must rise and light the gas; about him was the chill and the mean disorder of a house out of commission —the floor bare, the sofa heaped with books and accounts enveloped in a dirty table-cloth, the pens rusted, the paper glazed with a thick film of dust; and yet these were but adminicles of misery, and the true root of his depression lay round him on the table in the shape of misbegotten forgeries.

'It 's one of the strangest things I ever heard of,' he complained. 'It almost seems as if it was a talent that I didn't possess.' He went once more minutely through his proofs. 'A clerk would simply gibe at them,' said he. 'Well, there 's nothing else but tracing possible.'

He waited till a squall had passed and there came a blink of scowling daylight. Then he went to the window, and in the face of all John Street traced his uncle's signature. It was a poor thing at the best. 'But it must do,' said he, as he stood gazing wofully on his handiwork. 'He 's dead, anyway.' And he filled up the cheque for a couple of hundred and sallied forth for the Anglo-Patagonian Bank.

There, at the desk at which he was accustomed to transact business, and with as much indifference as he could assume, Morris presented the forged cheque to the big, red-bearded Scots teller. The teller seemed to view it with surprise; and as he turned it this way and that, and even scrutinised the signature with a magnifying-glass, his surprise appeared to

warm into disfavour. Begging to be excused for a moment, he passed away into the rearmost quarters of the bank; whence, after an appreciable interval, he returned again in earnest talk with a superior, an oldish and a baldish, but a very gentlemanly man.

'Mr. Morris Finsbury, I believe,' said the gentlemanly man, fixing Morris with a pair of double eyeglasses.

'That is my name,' said Morris, quavering. 'Is there anything wrong?'

'Well, the fact is, Mr. Finsbury, you see we are rather surprised at receiving this,' said the other, flicking at the cheque. 'There are no effects.'

'No effects?' cried Morris. 'Why, I know myself there must be eight-and-twenty hundred pounds, if there 's a penny.'

'Two seven six four, I think,' replied the gentlemanly man; 'but it was drawn yesterday.'

'Drawn!' cried Morris.

'By your uncle himself, sir,' continued the other. 'Not only that, but we discounted a bill for him for—let me see—how much was it for, Mr. Bell?'

'Eight hundred, Mr. Judkin,' replied the teller.

'Dent Pitman!' cried Morris, staggering back.

'I beg your pardon,' said Mr. Judkin.

'It 's—it 's only an expletive,' said Morris.

'I hope there 's nothing wrong, Mr. Finsbury,' said Mr. Bell.

'All I can tell you,' said Morris, with a harsh laugh, 'is that the whole thing 's impossible. My uncle is at Bournemouth, unable to move.'

'Really!' cried Mr. Bell, and he recovered the cheque from Mr. Judkin. 'But this cheque is dated in London, and to-day,' he observed. 'How d'ye account for that, sir?'

'O, that was a mistake,' said Morris, and a deep tide of colour dyed his face and neck.

'No doubt, no doubt,' said Mr. Judkin, but he looked at his customer inquiringly.

'And — and —' resumed Morris, 'even if there were no effects—this is a very trifling sum to overdraw—our firm—the name of Finsbury, is surely good enough for such a wretched sum as this.'

'No doubt, Mr. Finsbury,' returned Mr. Judkin; 'and if you insist I will take it into consideration; but I hardly think—in short, Mr. Finsbury, if there had been nothing else, the signature seems hardly all that we could wish.'

'That's of no consequence,' replied Morris nervously. 'I'll get my uncle to sign another. The fact is,' he went on, with a bold stroke, 'my uncle is so far from well at present that he was unable to sign this cheque without assistance, and I fear that my holding the pen for him may have made the difference in the signature.'

Mr. Judkin shot a keen glance into Morris's face; and then turned and looked at Mr. Bell.

'Well,' he said, 'it seems as if we have been victimised by a swindler. Pray tell Mr. Finsbury we shall put detectives on at once. As for this cheque of yours, I regret that, owing to the way it was signed, the bank can hardly consider it—what

shall I say?—business-like,' and he returned the cheque across the counter.

Morris took it up mechanically; he was thinking of something very different.

'In a case of this kind,' he began, 'I believe the loss falls on us; I mean upon my uncle and myself.'

'It does not, sir,' replied Mr. Bell; 'the bank is responsible, and the bank will either recover the money or refund it, you may depend on that.'

Morris's face fell; then it was visited by another gleam of hope.

'I'll tell you what,' he said, 'you leave this entirely in my hands. I'll sift the matter. I've an idea, at any rate; and detectives,' he added appealingly, 'are so expensive.'

'The bank would not hear of it,' returned Mr. Judkin. 'The bank stands to lose between three and four thousand pounds; it will spend as much more if necessary. An undiscovered forger is a permanent danger. We shall clear it up to the bottom, Mr. Finsbury; set your mind at rest on that.'

'Then I'll stand the loss,' said Morris boldly. 'I order you to abandon the search.' He was determined that no inquiry should be made.

'I beg your pardon,' returned Mr. Judkin, 'but we have nothing to do with you in this matter, which is one between your uncle and ourselves. If he should take this opinion, and will either come here himself or will let me see him in his sick-room——'

'Quite impossible,' cried Morris.

'Well then, you see,' said Mr. Judkin, 'how my hands are tied. The whole affair must go at once into the hands of the police.'

Morris mechanically folded the cheque and restored it to his pocket-book.

'Good-morning,' said he, and scrambled somehow out of the bank.

'I don't know what they suspect,' he reflected; 'I can't make them out, their whole behaviour is thoroughly unbusiness-like. But it doesn't matter; all's up with everything. The money has been paid; the police are on the scent; in two hours that idiot Pitman will be nabbed—and the whole story of the dead body in the evening papers.'

If he could have heard what passed in the bank after his departure he would have been less alarmed, perhaps more mortified.

'That was a curious affair, Mr. Bell,' said Mr. Judkin.

'Yes, sir,' said Mr. Bell, 'but I think we have given him a fright.'

'O, we shall hear no more of Mr. Morris Finsbury,' returned the other; 'it was a first attempt, and the house have dealt with us so long that I was anxious to deal gently. But I suppose, Mr. Bell, there can be no mistake about yesterday? It was old Mr. Finsbury himself?'

'There could be no possible doubt of that,' said Mr. Bell with a chuckle. 'He explained to me the principles of banking.'

'Well, well,' said Mr. Judkin. 'The next time he calls ask him to step into my room. It is only proper he should be warned.'

CHAPTER VII

IN WHICH WILLIAM DENT PITMAN TAKES LEGAL ADVICE

Norfolk Street, King's Road—jocularly known among Mr. Pitman's lodgers as 'Norfolk Island'—is neither a long, a handsome, nor a pleasing thoroughfare. Dirty, undersized maids-of-all-work issue from it in pursuit of beer, or linger on its sidewalk listening to the voice of love. The cat's-meat man passes twice a day. An occasional organ-grinder wanders in and wanders out again, disgusted. In holiday-time the street is the arena of the young bloods of the neighbourhood, and the householders have an opportunity of studying the manly art of self-defence. And yet Norfolk Street has one claim to be respectable, for it contains not a single shop—unless you count the public-house at the corner, which is really in the King's Road.

The door of No. 7 bore a brass plate inscribed with the legend 'W. D. Pitman, Artist.' It was not a particularly clean brass plate, nor was No. 7 itself a particularly inviting place of residence. And yet it had a character of its own, such as may well quicken the pulse of the reader's curiosity. For here

was the home of an artist—and a distinguished artist too, highly distinguished by his ill-success—which had never been made the subject of an article in the illustrated magazines. No wood-engraver had ever reproduced 'a corner in the back drawing-room' or 'the studio mantelpiece' of No. 7; no young lady author had ever commented on 'the unaffected simplicity' with which Mr. Pitman received her in the midst of his 'treasures.' It is an omission I would gladly supply, but our business is only with the backward parts and 'abject rear' of this æsthetic dwelling.

Here was a garden, boasting a dwarf fountain (that never played) in the centre, a few grimy-looking flowers in pots, two or three newly-planted trees which the spring of Chelsea visited without noticeable consequence, and two or three statues after the antique, representing satyrs and nymphs in the worst possible style of sculptured art. On one side the garden was overshadowed by a pair of crazy studios, usually hired out to the more obscure and youthful practitioners of British art. Opposite these another lofty out-building, somewhat more carefully finished, and boasting of a communication with the house and a private door on the back lane, enshrined the multifarious industry of Mr. Pitman. All day, it is true, he was engaged in the work of education at a seminary for young ladies; but the evenings at least were his own, and these he would prolong far into the night, now dashing off *A landscape with waterfall* in oil, now a volunteer bust ('in

marble,' as he would gently but proudly observe) of some public character, now stooping his chisel to a mere *nymph* ('for a gas-bracket on a stair, sir'), or a life-size *Infant Samuel* for a religious nursery. Mr. Pitman had studied in Paris, and he had studied in Rome, supplied with funds by a fond parent who went subsequently bankrupt in consequence of a fall in corsets; and though he was never thought to have the smallest modicum of talent, it was at one time supposed that he had learned his business. Eighteen years of what is called 'tuition' had relieved him of the dangerous knowledge. His artist lodgers would sometimes reason with him; they would point out to him how impossible it was to paint by gas-light, or to sculpture life-sized nymphs without a model.

'I know that,' he would reply. 'No one in Norfolk Street knows it better; and if I were rich I should certainly employ the best models in London; but, being poor, I have taught myself to do without them. An occasional model would only disturb my ideal conception of the figure, and be a positive impediment in my career. As for painting by an artificial light,' he would continue, 'that is simply a knack I have found it necessary to acquire, my days being engrossed in the work of tuition.'

At the moment when we must present him to our readers, Pitman was in his studio alone, by the dying light of the October day. He sat (sure enough with 'unaffected simplicity') in a Windsor chair, his low-crowned black felt hat by his side; a dark, weak,

harmless, pathetic little man, clad in the hue of mourning, his coat longer than is usual with the laity, his neck enclosed in a collar without a parting, his neckcloth pale in hue and simply tied; the whole outward man, except for a pointed beard, tentatively clerical. There was a thinning on the top of Pitman's head, there were silver hairs at Pitman's temple. Poor gentleman, he was no longer young; and years, and poverty, and humble ambition thwarted, make a cheerless lot.

In front of him, in the corner by the door, there stood a portly barrel; and let him turn them where he might, it was always to the barrel that his eyes and his thoughts returned.

'Should I open it? Should I return it? Should I communicate with Mr. Semitopolis at once?' he wondered. 'No,' he concluded finally, 'nothing without Mr. Finsbury's advice.' And he arose and produced a shabby leathern desk. It opened without the formality of unlocking, and displayed the thick cream-coloured note-paper on which Mr. Pitman was in the habit of communicating with the proprietors of schools and the parents of his pupils. He placed the desk on the table by the window, and taking a saucer of Indian ink from the chimney-piece, laboriously composed the following letter:

'My dear Mr. Finsbury,' it ran, 'would it be presuming on your kindness if I asked you to pay me a visit here this evening? It is in no trifling matter that I invoke your valuable assistance, for need I say more than it concerns the welfare of Mr. Semitopolis's

statue of Hercules? I write you in great agitation of mind; for I have made all inquiries, and greatly fear that this work of ancient art has been mislaid. I labour besides under another perplexity, not unconnected with the first. Pray excuse the inelegance of this scrawl, and believe me yours in haste, William D. Pitman.'

Armed with this he set forth and rang the bell of No. 233 King's Road, the private residence of Michael Finsbury. He had met the lawyer at a time of great public excitement in Chelsea; Michael, who had a sense of humour and a great deal of careless kindness in his nature, followed the acquaintance up, and, having come to laugh, remained to drop into a contemptuous kind of friendship. By this time, which was four years after the first meeting, Pitman was the lawyer's dog.

'No,' said the elderly housekeeper, who opened the door in person, 'Mr. Michael's not in yet. But ye're looking terribly poorly, Mr. Pitman. Take a glass of sherry, sir, to cheer ye up.'

'No, I thank you, ma'am,' replied the artist. 'It is very good in you, but I scarcely feel in sufficient spirits for sherry. Just give Mr. Finsbury this note, and ask him to look round—to the door in the lane, you will please tell him; I shall be in the studio all evening.'

And he turned again into the street and walked slowly homeward. A hair-dresser's window caught his attention, and he stared long and earnestly at the proud, high-born, waxen lady in evening dress, who

circulated in the centre of the show. The artist woke in him, in spite of his troubles.

'It is all very well to run down the men who make these things,' he cried, 'but there 's a something—there 's a haughty, indefinable something about that figure. It 's what I tried for in my *Empress Eugénie*,' he added, with a sigh.

And he went home reflecting on the quality. 'They don't teach you that direct appeal in Paris,' he thought. 'It 's British. Come, I am going to sleep, I must wake up, I must aim higher—aim higher,' cried the little artist to himself. All through his tea and afterward, as he was giving his eldest boy a lesson on the fiddle, his mind dwelt no longer on his troubles, but he was rapt into the better land; and no sooner was he at liberty than he hastened with positive exhilaration to his studio.

Not even the sight of the barrel could entirely cast him down. He flung himself with rising zest into his work—a bust of Mr. Gladstone from a photograph; turned (with extraordinary success) the difficulty of the back of the head, for which he had no documents beyond a hazy recollection of a public meeting; delighted himself by his treatment of the collar; and was only recalled to the cares of life by Michael Finsbury's rattle at the door.

'Well, what 's wrong?' said Michael, advancing to the grate, where, knowing his friend's delight in a bright fire, Mr. Pitman had not spared the fuel. 'I suppose you have come to grief somehow.'

'There is no expression strong enough,' said the

artist. 'Mr. Semitopolis's statue has not turned up, and I am afraid I shall be answerable for the money; but I think nothing of that—what I fear, my dear Mr. Finsbury, what I fear—alas that I should have to say it!—is exposure. The Hercules was to be smuggled out of Italy; a thing positively wrong, a thing of which a man of my principles and in my responsible position should have taken (as I now see too late) no part whatever.'

'This sounds like very serious work,' said the lawyer. 'It will require a great deal of drink, Pitman.'

'I took the liberty of—in short, of being prepared for you,' replied the artist, pointing to a kettle, a bottle of gin, a lemon, and glasses.

Michael mixed himself a grog, and offered the artist a cigar.

'No, thank you,' said Pitman. 'I used occasionally to be rather partial to it, but the smell is so disagreeable about the clothes.'

'All right,' said the lawyer. 'I am comfortable now. Unfold your tale.'

At some length Pitman set forth his sorrows. He had gone to-day to Waterloo, expecting to receive the colossal Hercules, and he had received instead a barrel not big enough to hold Discobolus; yet the barrel was addressed in the hand (with which he was perfectly acquainted) of his Roman correspondent. What was stranger still, a case had arrived by the same train, large enough and heavy enough to contain the Hercules; and this case had

been taken to an address now undiscoverable. 'The vanman (I regret to say it) had been drinking, and his language was such as I could never bring myself to repeat. He was at once discharged by the superintendent of the line, who behaved most properly throughout, and is to make inquiries at Southampton. In the meanwhile, what was I to do? I left my address and brought the barrel home; but, remembering an old adage, I determined not to open it except in the presence of my lawyer.'

'Is that all?' asked Michael. 'I don't see any cause to worry. The Hercules has stuck upon the road. It will drop in to-morrow or the day after; and as for the barrel, depend upon it, it's a testimonial from one of your young ladies, and probably contains oysters.'

'O, don't speak so loud!' cried the little artist. 'It would cost me my place if I were heard to speak lightly of the young ladies, and besides, why oysters from Italy? and why should they come to me addressed in Signor Ricardi's hand?'

'Well, let's have a look at it,' said Michael. 'Let's roll it forward to the light.'

The two men rolled the barrel from the corner, and stood it on end before the fire.

'It's heavy enough to be oysters,' remarked Michael judiciously.

'Shall we open it at once?' inquired the artist, who had grown decidedly cheerful under the combined effects of company and gin; and without waiting for a reply, he began to strip as if for a prize-

fight, tossed his clerical collar in the waste-paper basket, hung his clerical coat upon a nail, and with a chisel in one hand and a hammer in the other, struck the first blow of the evening.

'That 's the style, William Dent!' cried Michael. 'There 's fire for your money! It may be a romantic visit from one of the young ladies—a sort of Cleopatra business. Have a care and don't stave in Cleopatra's head.'

But the sight of Pitman's alacrity was infectious. The lawyer could sit still no longer. Tossing his cigar into the fire, he snatched the instrument from the unwilling hands of the artist, and fell to himself. Soon the sweat stood in beads upon his large, fair brow; his stylish trousers were defaced with iron rust, and the state of his chisel testified to misdirected energies.

A cask is not an easy thing to open, even when you set about it in the right way; when you set about it wrongly, the whole structure must be resolved into its elements. Such was the course pursued alike by the artist and the lawyer. Presently the last hoop had been removed—a couple of smart blows tumbled the staves upon the ground—and what had once been a barrel was no more than a confused heap of broken and distorted boards.

In the midst of these, a certain dismal something, swathed in blankets, remained for an instant upright, and then toppled to one side and heavily collapsed before the fire. Even as the thing subsided,

an eye-glass tingled to the floor and rolled toward the screaming Pitman.

'Hold your tongue!' said Michael. He dashed to the house door and locked it; then, with a pale face and bitten lip, he drew near, pulled aside a corner of the swathing blanket, and recoiled, shuddering.

There was a long silence in the studio.

'Now tell me,' said Michael, in a low voice: 'Had you any hand in it?' and he pointed to the body.

The little artist could only utter broken and disjointed sounds.

Michael poured some gin into a glass. 'Drink that,' he said. 'Don't be afraid of me. I'm your friend through thick and thin.'

Pitman put the liquor down untasted.

'I swear before God,' he said, 'this is another mystery to me. In my worst fears I never dreamed of such a thing. I would not lay a finger on a sucking infant.'

'That's all square,' said Michael, with a sigh of huge relief. 'I believe you, old boy.' And he shook the artist warmly by the hand. 'I thought for a moment,' he added with rather a ghastly smile, 'I thought for a moment you might have made away with Mr. Semitopolis.'

'It would make no difference if I had,' groaned Pitman. 'All is at an end for me. There's the writing on the wall.'

'To begin with,' said Michael, 'let's get him out

of sight; for to be quite plain with you, Pitman, I don't like your friend's appearance.' And with that the lawyer shuddered. 'Where can we put it!'

'You might put it in the closet there—if you could bear to touch it,' answered the artist.

'Somebody has to do it, Pitman,' returned the lawyer; 'and it seems as if it had to be me. You go over to the table, turn your back, and mix me a grog; that's a fair division of labour.'

About ninety seconds later the closet-door was heard to shut.

'There,' observed Michael, 'that's more home-like. You can turn now, my pallid Pitman. Is this the grog?' he ran on. 'Heaven forgive you, it's a lemonade.'

'But, O, Finsbury, what are we to do with it?' wailed the artist, laying a clutching hand upon the lawyer's arm.

'Do with it?' repeated Michael. 'Bury it in one of your flower-beds, and erect one of your own statues for a monument. I tell you we should look devilish romantic shovelling out the sod by the moon's pale ray. Here, put some gin in this.'

'I beg of you, Mr. Finsbury, do not trifle with my misery,' cried Pitman. 'You see before you a man who has been all his life—I do not hesitate to say it—eminently respectable. Even in this solemn hour I can lay my hand upon my heart without a blush. Except on the really trifling point of the smuggling of the Hercules (and even of that I now humbly repent), my life has been entirely fit for

publication. I never feared the light,' cried the little man; 'and now—now——!'

'Cheer up, old boy,' said Michael. 'I assure you we should count this little contretemps a trifle at the office; it's the sort of thing that may occur to any one; and if you're perfectly sure you had no hand in it——'

'What language am I to find——' began Pitman.

'O, I'll do that part of it,' interrupted Michael, 'you have no experience. But the point is this: If —or rather since—you know nothing of the crime, since the—the party in the closet—is neither your father, nor your brother, nor your creditor, nor your mother-in-law, nor what they call an injured husband——'

'O my dear sir!' interjected Pitman, horrified.

'Since, in short,' continued the lawyer, 'you had no possible interest in the crime, we have a perfectly free field before us and a safe game to play. Indeed the problem is really entertaining; it is one I have long contemplated in the light of an A. B. case; here it is at last under my hand in specie; and I mean to pull you through. Do you hear that?—I mean to pull you through. Let me see: it's a long time since I have had what I call a genuine holiday; I'll send an excuse to-morrow to the office. We had best be lively,' he added significantly; 'for we must not spoil the market for the other man.'

'What do you mean?' inquired Pitman. 'What other man? The inspector of police?'

'Damn the inspector of police!' remarked his companion. 'If you won't take the short cut and bury this in your back garden, we must find some one who will bury it in his. We must place the affair, in short, in the hands of some one with fewer scruples and more resources.'

'A private detective, perhaps?' suggested Pitman.

'There are times when you fill me with pity,' observed the lawyer. 'By the way, Pitman,' he added in another key, 'I have always regretted that you have no piano in this den of yours. Even if you don't play yourself, your friends might like to entertain themselves with a little music while you were mudding.'

'I shall get one at once if you like,' said Pitman nervously, anxious to please. 'I play the fiddle a little as it is.'

'I know you do,' said Michael; 'but what's the fiddle—above all as you play it? What you want is polyphonic music. And I'll tell you what it is, since it's too late for you to buy a piano I'll give you mine.'

'Thank you,' said the artist blankly. 'You will give me yours? I am sure it's very good in you.'

'Yes, I'll give you mine,' continued Michael, 'for the inspector of police to play on while his men are digging up your back garden.'

Pitman stared at him in pained amazement.

'No, I'm not insane,' Michael went on. 'I'm playful, but quite coherent. See here, Pitman:

follow me one half minute. I mean to profit by the refreshing fact that we are really and truly innocent; nothing but the presence of the—you know what—connects us with the crime; once let us get rid of it, no matter how, and there is no possible clue to trace us by. Well, I give you my piano; we 'll bring it round this very night. To-morrow we rip the fittings out, deposit the—our friend—inside, plump the whole on a cart, and carry it to the chambers of a young gentleman whom I know by sight.'

'Whom do you know by sight?' repeated Pitman.

'And what is more to the purpose,' continued Michael, 'whose chambers I know better than he does himself. A friend of mine—I call him my friend for brevity; he is now, I understand, in Demerara and (most likely) in jail—was the previous occupant. I defended him, and I got him off too—all saved but honour; his assets were *nil*, but he gave me what he had, poor gentleman, and along with the rest—the key of his chambers. It 's there that I propose to leave the piano and, shall we say, Cleopatra?'

'It seems very wild,' said Pitman. 'And what will become of the poor young gentleman whom you know by sight?'

'It will do him good,' said Michael cheerily. 'Just what he wants to steady him.'

'But, my dear sir, he might be involved in a charge of—a charge of murder,' gulped the artist.

'Well, he'll be just where we are,' returned the lawyer. 'He's innocent, you see. What hangs people, my dear Pitman, is the unfortunate circumstance of guilt.'

'But indeed, indeed,' pleaded Pitman, 'the whole scheme appears to me so wild. Would it not be safer, after all, just to send for the police?'

'And make a scandal?' inquired Michael. '"The Chelsea Mystery; alleged innocence of Pitman"? How would that do at the Seminary?'

'It would imply my discharge,' admitted the drawing-master. 'I cannot deny that.'

'And besides,' said Michael, 'I am not going to embark in such a business and have no fun for my money.'

'O my dear sir, is that a proper spirit?' cried Pitman.

'O, I only said that to cheer you up,' said the unabashed Michael. 'Nothing like a little judicious levity. But it's quite needless to discuss. If you mean to follow my advice, come on, and let us get the piano at once. If you don't, just drop me the word, and I'll leave you to deal with the whole thing according to your better judgment.'

'You know perfectly well that I depend on you entirely,' returned Pitman. 'But O, what a night is before me with that—horror in my studio! How am I to think of it on my pillow?'

'Well, you know, my piano will be there too,' said Michael. 'That'll raise the average.'

An hour later a cart came up the lane, and the

lawyer's piano—a momentous Broadwood grand—was deposited in Mr. Pitman's studio.

CHAPTER VIII

IN WHICH MICHAEL FINSBURY ENJOYS A HOLIDAY

PUNCTUALLY at eight o'clock next morning the lawyer rattled (according to previous appointment) on the studio door. He found the artist sadly altered for the worse—bleached, bloodshot, and chalky—a man upon wires, the tail of his haggard eye still wandering to the closet. Nor was the professor of drawing less inclined to wonder at his friend. Michael was usually attired in the height of fashion, with a certain mercantile brilliancy best described perhaps as stylish; nor could anything be said against him, as a rule, but that he looked a trifle too like a wedding guest to be quite a gentleman. To-day he had fallen altogether from these heights. He wore a flannel shirt of washed-out shepherd's tartan, and a suit of reddish tweeds, of the colour known to tailors as 'heather mixture'; his neckcloth was black, and tied loosely in a sailor's knot; a rusty ulster partly concealed these advantages; and his feet were shod with rough walking boots. His hat was an old soft felt, which he removed with a flourish as he entered.

'Here I am, William Dent!' he cried, and drawing from his pocket two little wisps of reddish hair,

he held them to his cheeks like side-whiskers and danced about the studio with the filmy graces of a ballet-girl.

Pitman laughed sadly. 'I should never have known you,' said he.

'Nor were you intended to,' returned Michael, replacing his false whiskers in his pocket. 'Now we must overhaul you and your wardrobe, and disguise you up to the nines.'

'Disguise!' cried the artist. 'Must I indeed disguise myself? Has it come to that?'

'My dear creature,' returned his companion, 'disguise is the spice of life. What is life, passionately exclaimed the French philosopher, without the pleasures of disguise? I don't say it's always good taste, and I know it's unprofessional; but what's the odds, down-hearted drawing-master? It has to be. We have to leave a false impression on the minds of many persons, and in particular on the mind of Mr. Gideon Forsyth—the young gentleman I know by sight—if he should have the bad taste to be at home.'

'If he be at home?' faltered the artist. 'That would be the end of all.'

'Won't matter a d——,' returned Michael airily. 'Let me see your clothes, and I'll make a new man of you in a jiffy.'

In the bedroom, to which he was at once conducted, Michael examined Pitman's poor and scanty wardrobe with a humorous eye, picked out a short jacket of black alpaca, and presently added to that

a pair of summer trousers which somehow took his fancy as incongruous. Then, with the garments in his hand, he scrutinised the artist closely.

'I don't like that clerical collar,' he remarked. 'Have you nothing else?'

The professor of drawing pondered for a moment, and then brightened; 'I have a pair of low-necked shirts,' he said, 'that I used to wear in Paris as a student. They are rather loud.'

'The very thing!' ejaculated Michael. 'You'll look perfectly beastly. Here are spats, too,' he continued, drawing forth a pair of those offensive little gaiters. 'Must have spats! And now you jump into these, and whistle a tune at the window for (say) three-quarters of an hour. After that you can rejoin me on the field of glory.'

So saying Michael returned to the studio. It was the morning of the easterly gale; the wind blew shrilly among the statues in the garden, and drove the rain upon the skylight in the studio ceiling; and at about the same moment of time when Morris attacked the hundredth version of his uncle's signature in Bloomsbury, Michael, in Chelsea, began to rip the wires out of the Broadwood grand.

Three-quarters of an hour later Pitman was admitted, to find the closet-door standing open, the closet untenanted, and the piano discreetly shut.

'It's a remarkably heavy instrument,' observed Michael, and turned to consider his friend's disguise. 'You must shave off that beard of yours,' he said.

'My beard!' cried Pitman. 'I cannot shave my

beard. I cannot tamper with my appearance—my principals would object. They hold very strong views as to the appearance of the professors—young ladies are considered so romantic. My beard was regarded as quite a feature when I went about the place. It was regarded,' said the artist, with rising colour, 'it was regarded as unbecoming.'

'You can let it grow again,' returned Michael, 'and then you'll be so precious ugly that they'll raise your salary.'

'But I don't want to look ugly,' cried the artist.

'Don't be an ass,' said Michael, who hated beards and was delighted to destroy one. 'Off with it like a man!'

'Of course, if you insist,' said Pitman; and then he sighed, fetched some hot water from the kitchen, and setting a glass upon his easel, first clipped his beard with scissors and then shaved his chin. He could not conceal from himself, as he regarded the result, that his last claims to manhood had been sacrificed, but Michael seemed delighted.

'A new man, I declare!' he cried. 'When I give you the window-glass spectacles I have in my pocket, you'll be the beau-idéal of a French commercial traveller.'

Pitman did not reply, but continued to gaze disconsolately on his image in the glass.

'Do you know,' asked Michael, 'what the Governor of South Carolina said to the Governor of North Carolina? "It's a long time between drinks," observed that powerful thinker; and if you will put

your hand into the top left-hand pocket of my ulster, I have an impression you will find a flask of brandy. Thank you, Pitman,' he added, as he filled out a glass for each. 'Now you will give me news of this.'

The artist reached out his hand for the water-jug, but Michael arrested the movement.

'Not if you went upon your knees!' he cried. 'This is the finest liqueur brandy in Great Britain.'

Pitman put his lips to it, set it down again, and sighed.

'Well, I must say you 're the poorest companion for a holiday!' cried Michael. 'If that 's all you know of brandy, you shall have no more of it; and while I finish the flask, you may as well begin business. Come to think of it,' he broke off, 'I have made an abominable error: you should have ordered the cart before you were disguised. Why, Pitman, what the devil 's the use of you? why couldn't you have reminded me of that?'

'I never even knew there was a cart to be ordered,' said the artist. 'But I can take off the disguise again,' he suggested eagerly.

'You would find it rather a bother to put on your beard,' observed the lawyer. 'No, it 's a false step; the sort of thing that hangs people,' he continued, with eminent cheerfulness, as he sipped his brandy; 'and it can't be retraced now. Off to the mews with you, make all the arrangements; they 're to take the piano from here, cart it to Victoria, and despatch it thence by rail to Cannon Street, to lie till called for in the name of Fortuné du Boisgobey.'

'Isn't that rather an awkward name?' pleaded Pitman.

'Awkward?' cried Michael scornfully. 'It would hang us both! Brown is both safer and easier to pronounce. Call it Brown.'

'I wish,' said Pitman, 'for my sake, I wish you wouldn't talk so much of hanging.'

'Talking about it's nothing, my boy!' returned Michael. 'But take your hat and be off, and mind and pay everything beforehand.'

Left to himself, the lawyer turned his attention for some time exclusively to the liqueur brandy, and his spirits, which had been pretty fair all morning, now prodigiously rose. He proceeded to adjust his whiskers finally before the glass. 'Devilish rich,' he remarked, as he contemplated his reflection, 'I look like a purser's mate.' And at that moment the window-glass spectacles (which he had hitherto destined for Pitman) flashed into his mind; he put them on, and fell in love with the effect. 'Just what I required,' he said. 'I wonder what I look like now? A humorous novelist, I should think,' and he began to practise divers characters of walk, naming them to himself as he proceeded. 'Walk of a humorous novelist—but that would require an umbrella. Walk of a purser's mate. Walk of an Australian colonist revisiting the scenes of childhood. Walk of Sepoy colonel, ditto, ditto.' And in the midst of the Sepoy colonel (which was an excellent assumption, although inconsistent with the style of his make-up) his eye lighted on the piano. This

instrument was made to lock both at the top and at the keyboard, but the key of the latter had been mislaid. Michael opened it and ran his fingers over the dumb keys. 'Fine instrument—full, rich tone,' he observed, and he drew in a seat.

When Mr. Pitman returned to the studio, he was appalled to observe his guide, philosopher, and friend performing miracles of execution on the silent grand.

'Heaven help me!' thought the little man, 'I fear he has been drinking! Mr. Finsbury,' he said aloud; and Michael, without rising, turned upon him a countenance somewhat flushed, encircled with the bush of the red whiskers, and bestridden by the spectacles. 'Capriccio in B-flat on the departure of a friend,' said he, continuing his noiseless evolutions.

Indignation awoke in the mind of Pitman. 'Those spectacles were to be mine,' he cried. 'They are an essential part of my disguise.'

'I am going to wear them myself,' replied Michael; and he added, with some show of truth, 'There would be a devil of a lot of suspicion aroused if we both wore spectacles.'

'O, well,' said the assenting Pitman, 'I rather counted on them; but of course, if you insist. And at any rate, here is the cart at the door.'

While the men were at work, Michael concealed himself in the closet among the débris of the barrel and the wires of the piano; and as soon as the coast was clear the pair sallied forth by the lane, jumped into a hansom in the King's Road, and were driven rapidly toward town. It was still cold and raw and

boisterous; the rain beat strongly in their faces, but Michael refused to have the glass let down; he had now suddenly donned the character of cicerone, and pointed out and lucidly commented on the sights of London, as they drove. 'My dear fellow,' he said, 'you don't seem to know anything of your native city. Suppose we visited the Tower? No? Well, perhaps it's a trifle out of our way. But, anyway —Here, cabby, drive round by Trafalgar Square!' And on that historic battle-field he insisted in drawing up, while he criticised the statues and gave the artist many curious details (quite new to history) of the lives of the celebrated men they represented.

It would be difficult to express what Pitman suffered in the cab: cold, wet, terror in the capital degree, a grounded distrust of the commander under whom he served, a sense of imprudency in the matter of the low-neck shirt, a bitter sense of the decline and fall involved in the deprivation of his beard, all these were among the ingredients of the bowl. To reach the restaurant, for which they were deviously steering, was the first relief. To hear Michael bespeak a private room was a second and a still greater. Nor, as they mounted the stair under the guidance of an unintelligible alien, did he fail to note with gratitude the fewness of the persons present, or the still more cheering fact that the greater part of these were exiles from the land of France. It was thus a blessed thought that none of them would be connected with the Seminary; for even a French professor, though admittedly a

Papist, he could scarce imagine frequenting so rakish an establishment.

The alien introduced them into a small bare room with a single table, a sofa, and a dwarfish fire; and Michael called promptly for more coals and a couple of brandies and sodas.

'O no,' said Pitman, 'surely not—no more to drink.'

'I don't know what you would be at,' said Michael plaintively. 'It's positively necessary to do something; and one shouldn't smoke before meals—I thought that was understood. You seem to have no idea of hygiene.' And he compared his watch with the clock upon the chimney-piece.

Pitman fell into bitter musing; here he was, ridiculously shorn, absurdly disguised, in the company of a drunken man in spectacles, and waiting for a champagne luncheon in a restaurant painfully foreign. What would his principals think, if they could see him? What if they knew his tragic and deceitful errand?

From these reflections he was aroused by the entrance of the alien with the brandies and sodas. Michael took one and bade the waiter pass the other to his friend.

Pitman waved it from him with his hand. 'Don't let me lose all self-respect,' he said.

'Anything to oblige a friend,' returned Michael. 'But I'm not going to drink alone. Here,' he added to the waiter, 'you take it.' And, then,

touching glasses, 'The health of Mr. Gideon Forsyth,' said he.

'Meestare Gidden Borsye,' replied the waiter, and he tossed off the liquor in four gulps.

'Have another?' said Michael, with undisguised interest. 'I never saw a man drink faster. It restores one's confidence in the human race.'

But the waiter excused himself politely, and, assisted by some one from without, began to bring in lunch.

Michael made an excellent meal, which he washed down with a bottle of Heidsieck's dry monopole. As for the artist, he was far too uneasy to eat, and his companion flatly refused to let him share in the champagne unless he did.

'One of us must stay sober,' remarked the lawyer, 'and I won't give you champagne on the strength of a leg of grouse. I have to be cautious,' he added confidentially. 'One drunken man, excellent business—two drunken men, all my eye.'

On the production of coffee and departure of the waiter, Michael might have been observed to make portentous efforts after gravity of mien. He looked his friend in the face (one eye perhaps a trifle off), and addressed him thickly but severely.

'Enough of this fooling,' was his not inappropriate exordium. 'To business. Mark me closely. I am an Australian. My name is John Dickson, though you mightn't think it from my unassuming appearance. You will be relieved to hear that I am rich, sir, very rich. You can't go into this sort of thing

too thoroughly, Pitman; the whole secret is preparation, and I can get up my biography from the beginning, and I could tell it you now, only I have forgotten it.'

'Perhaps I 'm stupid,' began Pitman.

'That 's it!' cried Michael. 'Very stupid; but rich too—richer than I am. I thought you would enjoy it, Pitman, so I 've arranged that you were to be literally wallowing in wealth. But then, on the other hand, you 're only an American, and a maker of india-rubber overshoes at that. And the worst of it is—why should I conceal it from you? —the worst of it is that you 're called Ezra Thomas. Now,' said Michael, with a really appalling seriousness of manner, 'tell me who we are.'

The unfortunate little man was cross-examined till he knew these facts by heart.

'There,' cried the lawyer. 'Our plans are laid. Thoroughly consistent—that 's the great thing.'

'But I don't understand,' objected Pitman.

'O, you 'll understand right enough when it comes to the point,' said Michael, rising.

'There doesn't seem any story to it,' said the artist.

'We can invent one as we go along,' returned the lawyer.

'But I can't invent,' protested Pitman. 'I never could invent in all my life.'

'You 'll find you 'll have to, my boy,' was Michael's easy comment, and he began calling for the waiter, with whom he at once resumed a sparkling conversation.

It was a downcast little man that followed him. 'Of course he is very clever, but can I trust him in such a state?' he asked himself. And when they were once more in the hansom, he took heart of grace.

'Don't you think,' he faltered, 'it would be wiser, considering all things, to put this business off?'

'Put off till to-morrow what can be done to-day?' cried Michael, with indignation. 'Never heard of such a thing! Cheer up, it's all right, go in and win—there's a lion-hearted Pitman!'

At Cannon Street they inquired for Mr. Brown's piano, which had duly arrived, drove thence to a neighbouring mews, where they contracted for a cart, and while that was being got ready, took shelter in the harness-room beside the stove. Here the lawyer presently toppled against the wall and fell into a gentle slumber; so that Pitman found himself launched on his own resources in the midst of several staring loafers, such as love to spend unprofitable days about a stable.

'Rough day, sir,' observed one. 'Do you go far?'

'Yes, it's a—rather a rough day,' said the artist; and then, feeling that he must change the conversation, 'My friend is an Australian; he is very impulsive,' he added.

'An Australian?' said another. 'I've a brother myself in Melbourne. Does your friend come from that way at all?'

'No, not exactly,' replied the artist, whose ideas of the geography of New Holland were a little

scattered. 'He lives immensely far inland, and is very rich.'

The loafers gazed with great respect upon the slumbering colonist.

'Well,' remarked the second speaker, 'it 's a mighty big place, is Australia. Do you come from thereaway too?'

'No, I do not,' said Pitman. 'I do not, and I don't want to,' he added irritably. And then, feeling some diversion needful, he fell upon Michael and shook him up.

'Hullo,' said the lawyer, 'what 's wrong?'

'The cart is nearly ready,' said Pitman sternly. 'I will not allow you to sleep.

'All right—no offence, old man,' replied Michael, yawning. 'A little sleep never did anybody any harm; I feel comparatively sober now. But what 's all the hurry?' he added, looking round him glassily. 'I don't see the cart, and I 've forgotten where we left the piano.'

What more the lawyer might have said, in the confidence of the moment, is with Pitman a matter of tremulous conjecture to this day; but by the most blessed circumstance the cart was then announced, and Michael must bend the forces of his mind to the more difficult task of rising.

'Of course you 'll drive,' he remarked to his companion, as he clambered on the vehicle.

'I drive!' cried Pitman. 'I never did such a thing in my life. I cannot drive.'

'Very well,' responded Michael with entire con-

posure, 'neither can I see. But just as you like. Anything to oblige a friend.'

A glimpse of the ostler's darkening countenance decided Pitman. 'All right,' he said desperately, 'you drive. I 'll tell you where to go.'

On Michael in the character of charioteer (since this is not intended to be a novel of adventure) it would be superfluous to dwell at length. Pitman, as he sat holding on and gasping counsels, sole witness of this singular feat, knew not whether most to admire the driver's valour or his undeserved good fortune. But the latter at least prevailed, the cart reached Cannon Street without disaster; and Mr. Brown's piano was speedily and cleverly got on board.

'Well, sir,' said the leading porter, smiling as he mentally reckoned up a handful of loose silver, 'that 's a mortal heavy piano.'

'It 's the richness of the tone,' returned Michael, as he drove away.

It was but a little distance in the rain, which now fell thick and quiet, to the neighbourhood of Mr. Gideon Forsyth's chambers in the Temple. There, in a deserted by-street, Michael drew up the horses and gave them in charge to a blighted shoe-black; and the pair descending from the cart, whereon they had figured so incongruously, set forth on foot for the decisive scene of their adventure. For the first time Michael displayed a shadow of uneasiness.

'Are my whiskers right?' he asked. 'It would be the devil and all if I was spotted.'

'They are perfectly in their place,' returned Pitman, with scant attention. 'But is my disguise equally effective? There is nothing more likely than that I should meet some of my patrons.'

'O, nobody could tell you without your beard,' said Michael. 'All you have to do is to remember to speak slow; you speak through your nose already.'

'I only hope the young man won't be at home,' sighed Pitman.

'And I only hope he 'll be alone,' returned the lawyer. 'It will save a precious sight of manœuvring.'

And sure enough, when they had knocked at the door, Gideon admitted them in person to a room, warmed by a moderate fire, framed nearly to the roof in works connected with the bench of British Themis, and offering, except in one particular, eloquent testimony to the legal zeal of the proprietor. The one particular was the chimney-piece, which displayed a varied assortment of pipes, tobacco, cigar-boxes, and yellow-backed French novels.

'Mr. Forsyth, I believe?' It was Michael who thus opened the engagement. 'We have come to trouble you with a piece of business. I fear it 's scarcely professional——'

'I am afraid I ought to be instructed through a solicitor,' replied Gideon.

'Well, well, you shall name your own, and the whole affair can be put on a more regular footing to-morrow,' replied Michael, taking a chair and motioning Pitman to do the same. 'But you see

we didn't know any solicitors; we did happen to know of you, and time presses.'

'May I inquire, gentlemen,' asked Gideon, 'to whom it was I am indebted for a recommendation?'

'You may inquire,' returned the lawyer, with a foolish laugh; 'but I was invited not to tell you—till the thing was done.'

'My uncle, no doubt,' was the barrister's conclusion.

'My name is John Dickson,' continued Michael; 'a pretty well known name in Ballarat; and my friend here is Mr. Ezra Thomas, of the United States of America, a wealthy manufacturer of india-rubber overshoes.'

'Stop one moment till I make a note of that,' said Gideon; any one might have supposed he was an old practitioner.

'Perhaps you wouldn't mind my smoking a cigar?' asked Michael. He had pulled himself together for the entrance; now again there began to settle on his mind clouds of irresponsible humour and incipient slumber; and he hoped (as so many have hoped in the like case) that a cigar would clear him.

'O, certainly,' cried Gideon blandly. 'Try one of mine; I can confidently recommend them.' And he handed the box to his client.

'In case I don't make myself perfectly clear,' observed the Australian, 'it's perhaps best to tell you candidly that I've been lunching. It's a thing that may happen to any one.'

'O, certainly,' replied the affable barrister. 'But

please be under no sense of hurry. I can give you,' he added, thoughtfully consulting his watch—'yes, I can give you the whole afternoon.'

'The business that brings me here,' resumed the Australian with gusto, 'is devilish delicate, I can tell you. My friend Mr. Thomas, being an American of Portuguese extraction, unacquainted with our habits, and a wealthy manufacturer of Broadwood pianos——'

'Broadwood pianos?' cried Gideon, with some surprise. 'Dear me, do I understand Mr. Thomas to be a member of the firm?'

'O, pirated Broadwoods,' returned Michael. 'My friend's the American Broadwood.'

'But I understood you to say,' objected Gideon, 'I certainly have it so in my notes—that your friend was a manufacturer of india-rubber overshoes.'

'I know it's confusing at first,' said the Australian, with a beaming smile. 'But he—in short, he combines the two professions. And many others besides—many, many, many others,' repeated Mr. Dickson, with drunken solemnity. 'Mr. Thomas's cotton-mills are one of the sights of Tallahassee; Mr. Thomas's tobacco-mills are the pride of Richmond, Va.; in short, he's one of my oldest friends, Mr. Forsyth, and I lay his case before you with emotion.'

The barrister looked at Mr. Thomas and was agreeably prepossessed by his open although nervous countenance, and the simplicity and timidity of his manner. 'What a people are these Americans!' he thought. 'Look at this nervous, weedy, simple little bird in a low-necked shirt, and think of him

wielding and directing interests so extended and seemingly incongruous! But had we not better,' he observed aloud, 'had we not perhaps better approach the facts?'

'Man of business, I perceive, sir!' said the Australian. 'Let's approach the facts. It's a breach of promise case.'

The unhappy artist was so unprepared for this view of his position that he could scarce suppress a cry.

'Dear me,' said Gideon, 'they are apt to be very troublesome. Tell me everything about it,' he added kindly; 'if you require my assistance, conceal nothing.'

'*You* tell him,' said Michael, feeling apparently that he had done his share. 'My friend will tell you all about it,' he added to Gideon, with a yawn. 'Excuse my closing my eyes a moment; I've been sitting up with a sick friend.'

Pitman gazed blankly about the room; rage and despair seethed in his innocent spirit; thoughts of flight, thoughts even of suicide, came and went before him; and still the barrister patiently waited, and still the artist groped in vain for any form of words, however insignificant.

'It's a breach of promise case,' he said at last, in a low voice. 'I—I am threatened with a breach of promise case.' Here, in desperate quest of inspiration, he made a clutch at his beard; his fingers closed upon the unfamiliar smoothness of a shaven chin; and with that, hope and courage (if

such expressions could ever have been appropriate in the case of Pitman) conjointly fled. He shook Michael roughly. 'Wake up!' he cried, with genuine irritation in his tones. 'I cannot do it, and you know I can't.'

'You must excuse my friend,' said Michael; 'he 's no hand as a narrator of stirring incident. The case is simple,' he went on. 'My friend is a man of very strong passions, and accustomed to a simple, patriarchal style of life. You see the thing from here: unfortunate visit to Europe, followed by unfortunate acquaintance with sham foreign count, who has a lovely daughter. Mr. Thomas was quite carried away; he proposed, he was accepted, and he wrote—wrote in a style which I am sure he must regret to-day. If these letters are produced in court, sir, Mr. Thomas's character is gone.'

'Am I to understand——' began Gideon.

'My dear sir,' said the Australian emphatically, 'it isn't possible to understand unless you saw them.'

'That is a painful circumstance,' said Gideon; he glanced pityingly in the direction of the culprit, and, observing on his countenance every mark of confusion, pityingly withdrew his eyes.

'And that would be nothing,' continued Mr. Dickson sternly, 'but I wish—I wish from my heart, sir, I could say that Mr. Thomas's hands were clean. He has no excuse; for he was engaged at the time—and is still engaged—to the belle of Constantinople, Ga. My friend's conduct was unworthy of the brutes that perish.'

'Ga.?' repeated Gideon inquiringly.

'A contraction in current use,' said Michael. 'Ga. for Georgia, in the same way as Co. for Company.'

'I was aware it was sometimes so written,' returned the barrister, 'but not that it was so pronounced.'

'Fact, I assure you,' said Michael. 'You now see for yourself, sir, that if this unhappy person is to be saved, some devilish sharp practice will be needed. There's money, and no desire to spare it. Mr. Thomas could write a cheque to-morrow for a hundred thousand. And, Mr. Forsyth, there's better than money. The foreign count — Count Tarnow, he calls himself—was formerly a tobacconist in Bayswater, and passed under the humble but expressive name of Schmidt; his daughter—if she is his daughter—there's another point—make a note of that, Mr. Forsyth—his daughter at that time actually served in the shop—and she now proposes to marry a man of the eminence of Mr. Thomas! Now do you see our game? We know they contemplate a move; and we wish to forestall 'em. Down you go to Hampton Court, where they live, and threaten, or bribe, or both, until you get the letters; if you can't, God help us, we must go to court and Thomas must be exposed. I'll be done with him for one,' added the unchivalrous friend.

'There seem some elements of success,' said Gideon. 'Was Schmidt at all known to the police?'

'We hope so,' said Michael. 'We have every ground to think so. Mark the neighbourhood—Bayswater! doesn't Bayswater occur to you as very suggestive?'

For perhaps the sixth time during this remarkable interview, Gideon wondered if he were not becoming light-headed. 'I suppose it's just because he has been lunching,' he thought; and then added aloud, 'To what figure may I go?'

'Perhaps five thousand would be enough for to-day,' said Michael. 'And now, sir, do not let me detain you any longer; the afternoon wears on; there are plenty of trains to Hampton Court; and I needn't try to describe to you the impatience of my friend. Here is a five-pound note for current expenses; and here is the address.' And Michael began to write, paused, tore up the paper, and put the pieces in his pocket. 'I will dictate,' he said, 'my writing is so uncertain.'

Gideon took down the address, 'Count Tarnow, Kurnaul Villa, Hampton Court.' Then he wrote something else on a sheet of paper. 'You said you had not chosen a solicitor,' he said. 'For a case of this sort, here is the best man in London.' And he handed the paper to Michael.

'God bless me!' ejaculated Michael, as he read his own address.

'O, I daresay you have seen his name connected with some rather painful cases,' said Gideon. 'But he is himself a perfectly honest man, and his capacity is recognised. And now, gentlemen, it only remains

for me to ask where I shall communicate with you.'

'The Langham, of course,' returned Michael. 'Till to-night.'

'Till to-night,' replied Gideon, smiling. 'I suppose I may knock you up at a late hour?'

'Any hour, any hour,' cried the vanishing solicitor.

'Now there's a young fellow with a head upon his shoulders,' he said to Pitman, as soon as they were in the street.

Pitman was indistinctly heard to murmur, 'Perfect fool.'

'Not a bit of him,' returned Michael. 'He knows who's the best solicitor in London, and it's not every man can say the same. But, I say, didn't I pitch it in hot?'

Pitman returned no answer.

'Hullo!' said the lawyer, pausing, 'what's wrong with the long-suffering Pitman?'

'You had no right to speak of me as you did,' the artist broke out; 'your language was perfectly unjustifiable; you have wounded me deeply.'

'I never said a word about you,' replied Michael. 'I spoke of Ezra Thomas; and do please remember that there's no such party.'

'It's just as hard to bear,' said the artist.

But by this time they had reached the corner of the by-street; and there was the faithful shoeblack, standing by the horses' heads with a splendid assumption of dignity; and there was the piano, figuring forlorn upon the cart, while the rain beat

upon its unprotected sides and trickled down its elegantly varnished legs.

The shoeblack was again put in requisition to bring five or six strong fellows from the neighbouring public-house; and the last battle of the campaign opened. It is probable that Mr. Gideon Forsyth had not yet taken his seat in the train for Hampton Court, before Michael opened the door of the chambers, and the grunting porters deposited the Broadwood grand in the middle of the floor.

'And now,' said the lawyer, after he had sent the men about their business, 'one more precaution. We must leave him the key of the piano, and we must contrive that he shall find it. Let me see.' And he built a square tower of cigars upon the top of the instrument, and dropped the key into the middle.

'Poor young man,' said the artist, as they descended the stairs.

'He is in a devil of a position,' assented Michael drily. 'It 'll brace him up.'

'And that reminds me,' observed the excellent Pitman, 'that I fear I displayed a most ungrateful temper. I had no right, I see, to resent expressions, wounding as they were, which were in no sense directed.'

'That 's all right,' cried Michael, getting on the cart. 'Not a word more, Pitman. Very proper feeling on your part; no man of self-respect can stand by and hear his *alias* insulted.'

The rain had now ceased, Michael was fairly sober,

the body had been disposed of, and the friends were reconciled. The return to the mews was therefore (in comparison with previous stages of the day's adventures) quite a holiday outing; and when they had returned the cart and walked forth again from the stable-yard, unchallenged and even unsuspected, Pitman drew a deep breath of joy.

'And now,' he said, 'we can go home.'

'Pitman,' said the lawyer, stopping short, 'your recklessness fills me with concern. What! we have been wet through the greater part of the day, and you propose, in cold blood, to go home! No, sir—hot Scotch.'

And taking his friend's arm he led him sternly toward the nearest public-house. Nor was Pitman (I regret to say) wholly unwilling. Now that peace was restored and the body gone, a certain innocent skittishness began to appear in the manners of the artist; and when he touched his steaming glass to Michael's, he giggled aloud like a venturesome school-girl at a picnic.

CHAPTER IX

GLORIOUS CONCLUSION OF MICHAEL FINSBURY'S HOLIDAY

I KNOW Michael Finsbury personally; my business —I know the awkwardness of having such a man for a lawyer—still it 's an old story now, and there is

such a thing as gratitude, and, in short, my legal business, although now (I am thankful to say) of quite a placid character, remains entirely in Michael's hands. But the trouble is I have no natural talent for addresses; I learn one for every man—that is friendship's offering; and the friend who subsequently changes his residence is dead to me, memory refusing to pursue him. Thus it comes about that, as I always write to Michael at his office, I cannot swear to his number in the King's Road. Of course (like my neighbours) I have been to dinner there. Of late years, since his accession to wealth, neglect of business, and election to the club, these little festivals have become common. He picks up a few fellows in the smoking-room—all men of Attic wit—myself, for instance, if he has the luck to find me disengaged; a string of hansoms may be observed (by her Majesty) bowling gaily through St. James's Park; and in a quarter of an hour the party surrounds one of the best appointed boards in London.

But at the time of which we write the house in the King's Road (let us still continue to call it No. 233) was kept very quiet; when Michael entertained guests it was at the halls of Nichol or Verrey that he would convene them, and the door of his private residence remained closed against his friends. The upper story, which was sunny, was set apart for his father; the drawing-room was never opened; the dining-room was the scene of Michael's life. It is in this pleasant apartment, sheltered from the

curiosity of King's Road by wire blinds, and entirely surrounded by the lawyer's unrivalled library of poetry and criminal trials, that we find him sitting down to his dinner after his holiday with Pitman. A spare old lady, with very bright eyes and a mouth humorously compressed, waited upon the lawyer's needs; in every line of her countenance she betrayed the fact that she was an old retainer; in every word that fell from her lips she flaunted the glorious circumstance of a Scottish origin; and the fear with which this powerful combination fills the boldest was obviously no stranger to the bosom of our friend. The hot Scotch having somewhat warmed up the embers of the Heidsieck, it was touching to observe the master's eagerness to pull himself together under the servant's eye; and when he remarked, 'I think, Teena, I'll take a brandy and soda,' he spoke like a man doubtful of his elocution, and not half certain of obedience.

'No such a thing, Mr. Michael,' was the prompt return. 'Clar't and water.'

'Well, well, Teena, I daresay you know best,' said the master. 'Very fatiguing day at the office, though.'

'What?' said the retainer, 'ye never were near the office!'

'O yes, I was though; I was repeatedly along Fleet Street,' returned Michael.

'Pretty pliskies ye've been at this day!' cried the old lady, with humorous alacrity; and then, 'Take care—don't break my crystal!' she cried, as

the lawyer came within an ace of knocking the glasses off the table.

'And how is he keeping?' asked Michael.

'O, just the same, Mr. Michael, just the way he'll be till the end, worthy man!' was the reply. 'But ye'll not be the first that's asked me that the day.'

'No?' said the lawyer. 'Who else?'

'Ay, that's a joke, too,' said Teena grimly. 'A friend of yours: Mr. Morris.'

'Morris! What was the little beggar wanting here?' inquired Michael.

'Wantin'? To see him,' replied the housekeeper, completing her meaning by a movement of the thumb toward the upper story. 'That's by his way of it; but I've an idee of my own. He tried to bribe me, Mr. Michael. Bribe—me!' she repeated, with inimitable scorn. 'That's no' kind of a young gentleman.'

'Did he so?' said Michael. 'I bet he didn't offer much.'

'No more he did,' replied Teena; nor could any subsequent questioning elicit from her the sum with which the thrifty leather-merchant had attempted to corrupt her. 'But I sent him about his business,' she said gallantly. 'He'll not come here again in a hurry.'

'He mustn't see my father, you know; mind that!' said Michael. 'I'm not going to have any public exhibition to a little beast like him.'

'No fear of me lettin' him,' replied the trusty

one. 'But the joke is this, Mr. Michael—see, ye 're upsettin' the sauce, that 's a clean table-cloth—the best of the joke is that he thinks your father 's dead and you 're keeping it dark.'

Michael whistled. 'Set a thief to catch a thief,' said he.

'Exac'ly what I told him!' cried the delighted dame.

'I 'll make him dance for that,' said Michael.

'Couldn't ye get the law of him some way?' suggested Teena truculently.

'No, I don't think I could, and I'm quite sure I don't want to,' replied Michael. 'But I say, Teena, I really don't believe this claret 's wholesome; it 's not a sound, reliable wine. Give us a brandy and soda, there 's a good soul.' Teena's face became like adamant. 'Well, then,' said the lawyer fretfully, 'I won't eat any more dinner.'

'Ye can please yourself about that, Mr. Michael,' said Teena, and began composedly to take away.

'I do wish Teena wasn't a faithful servant!' sighed the lawyer, as he issued into King's Road.

The rain had ceased; the wind still blew, but only with a pleasant freshness; the town, in the clear darkness of the night, glittered with street-lamps and shone with glancing rain-pools. 'Come, this is better,' thought the lawyer to himself, and he walked on eastward, lending a pleased ear to the wheels and the million footfalls of the city.

Near the end of the King's Road he remembered his brandy and soda, and entered a flaunting public-

house. A good many persons were present, a waterman from a cab-stand, half a dozen of the chronically unemployed, a gentleman (in one corner) trying to sell æsthetic photographs out of a leather case to another and very youthful gentleman with a yellow goatee, and a pair of lovers debating some fine shade (in the other). But the centre-piece and great attraction was a little old man, in a black, ready-made surtout, which was obviously a recent purchase. On the marble table in front of him, beside a sandwich and a glass of beer, there lay a battered forage-cap. His hand fluttered abroad with oratorical gestures; his voice, naturally shrill, was plainly tuned to the pitch of the lecture-room; and by arts, comparable to those of the Ancient Mariner, he was now holding spell-bound the barmaid, the waterman, and four of the unemployed.

'I have examined all the theatres in London,' he was saying; 'and pacing the principal entrances, I have ascertained them to be ridiculously disproportionate to the requirements of their audiences. The doors opened the wrong way — I forget at this moment which it is, but have a note of it at home; they were frequently locked during the performance, and when the auditorium was literally thronged with English people. You have probably not had my opportunities of comparing distant lands; but I can assure you this has been long ago recognised as a mark of aristocratic government. Do you suppose, in a country really self-governed, such abuses could exist? Your own intelligence, however uncultivated,

tells you they could not. Take Austria, a country even possibly more enslaved than England. I have myself conversed with one of the survivors of the Ring Theatre, and though his colloquial German was not very good, I succeeded in gathering a pretty clear idea of his opinion of the case. But, what will perhaps interest you still more, here is a cutting on the subject from a Vienna newspaper, which I will now read to you, translating as I go. You can see for yourselves; it is printed in the German character.' And he held the cutting out for verification, much as a conjurer passes a trick orange along the front bench.

'Hullo, old gentleman! is this you?' said Michael, laying his hand upon the orator's shoulder.

The figure turned with a convulsion of alarm, and showed the countenance of Mr. Joseph Finsbury.

'You, Michael!' he cried. 'There's no one with you, is there?'

'No,' replied Michael, ordering a brandy and soda, 'there's nobody with me; whom do you expect?'

'I thought of Morris or John,' said the old gentleman, evidently greatly relieved.

'What the devil would I be doing with Morris or John?' cried the nephew.

'There is something in that,' returned Joseph. 'And I believe I can trust you. I believe you will stand by me.'

'I hardly know what you mean,' said the lawyer, 'but if you are in need of money I am flush.'

'It's not that, my dear boy,' said the uncle, shaking him by the hand. 'I'll tell you all about it afterwards.'

'All right,' responded the nephew. 'I stand treat, Uncle Joseph; what will you have?'

'In that case,' replied the old gentleman, 'I'll take another sandwich. I daresay I surprise you,' he went on, 'with my presence in a public-house; but the fact is, I act on a sound but little-known principle of my own——'

'O, it's better known than you suppose,' said Michael, sipping his brandy and soda. 'I always act on it myself when I want a drink.'

The old gentleman, who was anxious to propitiate Michael, laughed a cheerless laugh. 'You have such a flow of spirits,' said he, 'I am sure I often find it quite amusing. But regarding this principle of which I was about to speak. It is that of accommodating one's-self to the manners of any land (however humble) in which our lot may be cast. Now, in France, for instance, every one goes to a café for his meals; in America, to what is called a "two-bit house"; in England the people resort to such an institution as the present for refreshment. With sandwiches, tea, and an occasional glass of bitter beer, a man can live luxuriously in London for fourteen pounds twelve shillings per annum.'

'Yes, I know,' returned Michael, 'but that's not including clothes, washing, or boots. The whole thing, with cigars and occasional sprees, costs me over seven hundred a year.'

But this was Michael's last interruption. He listened in good-humoured silence to the remainder of his uncle's lecture, which speedily branched to political reform, thence to the theory of the weather-glass, with an illustrative account of a bora in the Adriatic; thence again to the best manner of teaching arithmetic to the deaf-and-dumb; and with that, the sandwich being then no more, *explicuit valde feliciter*. A moment later the pair issued forth on the King's Road.

'Michael,' said his uncle, 'the reason that I am here is because I cannot endure those nephews of mine. I find them intolerable.'

'I daresay you do,' assented Michael, 'I never could stand them for a moment.'

'They wouldn't let me speak,' continued the old gentleman bitterly; 'I never was allowed to get a word in edgewise; I was shut up at once with some impertinent remark. They kept me on short allowance of pencils, when I wished to make notes of the most absorbing interest; the daily newspaper was guarded from me like a young baby from a gorilla. Now, you know me, Michael. I live for my calculations; I live for my manifold and ever-changing views of life; pens and paper and the productions of the popular press are to me as important as food and drink; and my life was growing quite intolerable when, in the confusion of that fortunate railway accident at Browndean, I made my escape. They must think me dead, and are trying to deceive the world for the chance of the tontine.'

'By the way, how do you stand for money?' asked Michael kindly.

'Pecuniarily speaking, I am rich,' returned the old man with cheerfulness. 'I am living at present at the rate of one hundred a year, with unlimited pens and paper; the British Museum at which to get books; and all the newspapers I choose to read. But it's extraordinary how little a man of intellectual interest requires to bother with books in a progressive age. The newspapers supply all the conclusions.'

'I 'll tell you what,' said Michael, 'come and stay with me.'

'Michael,' said the old gentleman, 'it's very kind of you, but you scarcely understand what a peculiar position I occupy. There are some little financial complications; as a guardian, my efforts were not altogether blessed; and not to put too fine a point upon the matter, I am absolutely in the power of that vile fellow Morris.'

'You should be disguised,' cried Michael eagerly; 'I will lend you a pair of window-glass spectacles and some red side-whiskers.'

'I had already canvassed that idea,' replied the old gentleman, 'but feared to awaken remark in my unpretentious lodgings. The aristocracy, I am well aware——'

'But see here,' interrupted Michael, 'how do you come to have any money at all? Don't make a stranger of me, Uncle Joseph; I know all about the trust, and the hash you made of

it, and the assignment you were forced to make to Morris.'

Joseph narrated his dealings with the bank.

'O, but I say, this won't do,' cried the lawyer. 'You 've put your foot in it. You had no right to do what you did.'

'The whole thing is mine, Michael,' protested the old gentleman. 'I founded and nursed that business on principles entirely of my own.'

'That 's all very fine,' said the lawyer; 'but you made an assignment, you were forced to make it, too; even then your position was extremely shaky; but now, my dear sir, it means the dock.'

'It isn't possible,' cried Joseph; 'the law cannot be so unjust as that?'

'And the cream of the thing,' interrupted Michael, with a sudden shout of laughter, 'the cream of the thing is this, that of course you 've downed the leather business! I must say, Uncle Joseph, you have strange ideas of law, but I like your taste in humour.'

'I see nothing to laugh at,' observed Mr. Finsbury tartly.

'And talking of that, has Morris any power to sign for the firm?' asked Michael.

'No one but myself,' replied Joseph.

'Poor devil of a Morris! O, poor devil of a Morris!' cried the lawyer in delight. 'And his keeping up the farce that you 're at home! O, Morris, the Lord has delivered you into my hands! Let me see, Uncle Joseph, what do you suppose the leather business worth?'

'It *was* worth a hundred thousand,' said Joseph bitterly, 'when it was in my hands. But then there came a Scotsman—it is supposed he had a certain talent—it was entirely directed to book-keeping—no accountant in London could understand a word of any of his books; and then there was Morris, who is perfectly incompetent. And now it is worth very little. Morris tried to sell it last year; and Pogram and Jarris offered only four thousand.'

'I shall turn my attention to leather,' said Michael, with decision.

'You?' asked Joseph. 'I advise you not. There is nothing in the whole field of commerce more surprising than the fluctuations of the leather market. Its sensitiveness may be described as morbid.'

'And now, Uncle Joseph, what have you done with all that money?' asked the lawyer.

'Paid it into a bank and drew twenty pounds,' answered Mr. Finsbury promptly. 'Why?'

'Very well,' said Michael. 'To-morrow I shall send down a clerk with a cheque for a hundred, and he'll draw out the original sum and return it to the Anglo-Patagonian, with some sort of explanation which I will try to invent for you. That will clear your feet, and as Morris can't touch a penny of it without forgery, it will do no harm to my little scheme.'

'But what am I to do?' asked Joseph; 'I cannot live upon nothing.'

'Don't you hear?' returned Michael. 'I send you a cheque for a hundred; which leaves you eighty

to go along upon; and when that's done, apply to me again.'

'I would rather not be beholden to your bounty all the same,' said Joseph, biting at his white moustache. 'I would rather live on my own money, since I have it.'

Michael grasped his arm. 'Will nothing make you believe,' he cried, 'that I am trying to save you from Dartmoor?'

His earnestness staggered the old man. 'I must turn my attention to law,' he said; 'it will be a new field; for though of course I understand its general principles, I have never really applied my mind to the details, and this view of yours, for example, comes on me entirely by surprise. But you may be right, and of course at my time of life—for I am no longer young—any really long term of imprisonment would be highly prejudicial. But, my dear nephew, I have no claim on you; you have no call to support me.'

'That's all right,' said Michael; 'I'll probably get it out of the leather business.'

And having taken down the old gentleman's address, Michael left him at the corner of a street.

'What a wonderful old muddler!' he reflected, 'and what a singular thing is life! I seem to be condemned to be the instrument of Providence. Let me see; what have I done to-day? Disposed of a dead body, saved Pitman, saved my Uncle Joseph, brightened up Forsyth, and drunk a devil of a lot of most indifferent liquor. Let's top off with a

visit to my cousins, and be the instrument of Providence in earnest. To-morrow I can turn my attention to leather; to-night I'll just make it lively for 'em in a friendly spirit.'

About a quarter of an hour later, as the clocks were striking eleven, the instrument of Providence descended from a hansom, and, bidding the driver wait, rapped at the door of No. 16 John Street.

It was promptly opened by Morris.

'O, it's you, Michael,' he said, carefully blocking up the narrow opening: 'it's very late.'

Michael without a word reached forth, grasped Morris warmly by the hand, and gave it so extreme a squeeze that the sullen householder fell back. Profiting by this movement, the lawyer obtained a footing in the lobby and marched into the dining-room, with Morris at his heels.

'Where's my Uncle Joseph?' demanded Michael, sitting down in the most comfortable chair.

'He's not been very well lately,' replied Morris. 'He's staying at Browndean; John is nursing him; and I am alone, as you see.'

Michael smiled to himself. 'I want to see him on particular business,' he said.

'You can't expect to see my uncle when you won't let me see your father,' returned Morris.

'Fiddlestick,' said Michael. 'My father is my father; but Joseph is just as much my uncle as he's yours; and you have no right to sequestrate his person.'

'I do no such thing,' said Morris doggedly. 'He

is not well, he is dangerously ill and nobody can see him.'

'I 'll tell you what, then,' said Michael. 'I' ll make a clean breast of it. I have come down like the opossum, Morris; I have come to compromise.'

Poor Morris turned as pale as death, and then a flush of wrath against the injustice of man's destiny dyed his very temples. 'What do you mean?' he cried, 'I don't believe a word of it!' And when Michael had assured him of his seriousness, 'Well, then,' he cried, with another deep flush, 'I won't; so you can put that in your pipe and smoke it.'

'Oho!' said Michael queerly. 'You say your uncle is dangerously ill, and you won't compromise? There 's something very fishy about that.'

'What do you mean?' cried Morris hoarsely.

'I only say it 's fishy,' returned Michael, 'that is, pertaining to the finny tribe.'

'Do you mean to insinuate anything?' cried Morris stormily, trying the high hand.

'Insinuate?' repeated Michael. 'O, don't let 's begin to use awkward expressions! Let us drown our differences in a bottle, like two affable kinsmen. *The Two Affable Kinsmen*, sometimes attributed to Shakespeare,' he added.

Morris's mind was labouring like a mill. 'Does he suspect? or is this chance and stuff? Should I soap, or should I bully? Soap,' he concluded. 'It gains time. Well,' said he aloud, and with rather a painful affectation of heartiness, 'it 's long since

we have had an evening together, Michael; and though my habits (as you know) are very temperate, I may as well make an exception. Excuse me one moment till I fetch a bottle of whisky from the cellar.'

'No whisky for me,' said Michael; 'a little of the old still champagne or nothing.'

For a moment Morris stood irresolute, for the wine was very valuable: the next he had quitted the room without a word. His quick mind had perceived his advantage; in thus dunning him for the cream of the cellar, Michael was playing into his hand. 'One bottle?' he thought. 'By George, I'll give him two! this is no moment for economy; and once the beast is drunk, it's strange if I don't wring his secret out of him.'

With two bottles, accordingly, he returned. Glasses were produced, and Morris filled them with hospitable grace.

'I drink to you, cousin!' he cried gaily. 'Don't spare the wine-cup in my house.'

Michael drank his glass deliberately, standing at the table; filled it again, and returned to his chair, carrying the bottle along with him.

'The spoils of war!' he said apologetically. 'The weakest goes to the wall. Science, Morris, science.' Morris could think of no reply, and for an appreciable interval silence reigned. But two glasses of the still champagne produced a rapid change in Michael.

'There's a want of vivacity about you, Morris,'

he observed. 'You may be deep; but I'll be hanged if you're vivacious!'

'What makes you think me deep?' asked Morris, with an air of pleased simplicity.

'Because you won't compromise,' said the lawyer. 'You're deep dog, Morris, very deep dog, not t' compromise—remarkable deep dog. And a very good glass of wine; it's the only respectable feature in the Finsbury family, this wine; rarer thing than a title—much rarer. Now a man with glass wine like this in cellar, I wonder why won't compromise?'

'Well, *you* wouldn't compromise before, you know,' said the smiling Morris. 'Turn about is fair play.'

'I wonder why *I* wouldn' compromise? I wonder why *you* wouldn'?' inquired Michael. 'I wonder why we each think the other wouldn'? 'S quite a remarrable—remarkable problem,' he added, triumphing over oral obstacles, not without obvious pride. 'Wonder what we each think—don't you?'

'What do you suppose to have been my reason?' asked Morris adroitly.

Michael looked at him and winked. 'That's cool,' said he. 'Next thing, you'll ask me to help you out of the muddle. I know I'm emissary of Providence, but not that kind! You get out of it yourself, like Æsop and the other fellow. Must be dreadful muddle for young orphan o' forty; leather business and all!'

'I am sure I don't know what you mean,' said Morris.

'Not sure I know myself,' said Michael. 'This is exc'lent vintage, sir—exc'lent vintage. Nothing against the tipple. Only thing: here's a valuable uncle disappeared. Now, what I want to know: where's valuable uncle?'

'I have told you: he is at Browndean,' answered Morris, furtively wiping his brow, for these repeated hints began to tell upon him cruelly.

'Very easy say Brown—Browndee—no' so easy after all!' cried Michael. 'Easy say; anything's easy say, when you can say it. What I don' like's total disappearance of an uncle. Not business-like.' And he wagged his head.

'It is all perfectly simple,' returned Morris, with laborious calm. 'There is no mystery. He stays at Browndean, where he got a shake in the accident.'

'Ah!' said Michael, 'got devil of a shake!'

'Why do you say that?' cried Morris sharply.

'Best possible authority. Told me so yourself,' said the lawyer. 'But if you tell me contrary now, of course I'm bound to believe either the one story or the other. Point is—I've upset this bottle, still champagne's exc'lent thing carpet—point is, is valuable uncle dead—an'—bury?'

Morris sprang from his seat. 'What's that you say?' he gasped.

'I say it's exc'lent thing carpet,' replied Michael, rising. 'Exc'lent thing promote healthy action of the skin. Well, it's all one, anyway. Give my love to Uncle Champagne.'

'You're not going away?' said Morris.

'Awf'ly sorry, ole man. Got to sit up sick friend,' said the wavering Michael.

'You shall not go till you have explained your hints,' returned Morris fiercely. 'What do you mean? What brought you here?'

'No offence, I trust,' said the lawyer, turning round as he opened the door; 'only doing my duty as shemishery of Providence.'

Groping his way to the front-door, he opened it with some difficulty, and descended the steps to the hansom. The tired driver looked up as he approached, and asked where he was to go next.

Michael observed that Morris had followed him to the steps; a brilliant inspiration came to him. 'Anything t'give pain,' he reflected. . . . 'Drive Shcotlan' Yard,' he added aloud, holding to the wheel to steady himself; 'there 's something devilish fishy, cabby, about those cousins. Mush' be cleared up! Drive Shcotlan' Yard.'

'You don't mean that, sir,' said the man, with the ready sympathy of the lower orders for an intoxicated gentleman. 'I had better take you home, sir; you can go to Scotland Yard to-morrow.'

'Is it as friend or as perfessional man you advise me not to go Shcotlan' Yard t'night?' inquired Michael. 'All righ', never min' Shcotlan' Yard, drive Gaiety bar.'

'The Gaiety bar is closed,' said the man.

'Then home,' said Michael, with the same cheerfulness.

'Where to, sir?'

'I don't remember, I 'm sure,' said Michael, entering the vehicle, 'drive Shcotlan' Yard and ask.'

'But you 'll have a card,' said the man, through the little aperture in the top; 'give me your card-case.'

'What imagi—imagination in a cabby!' cried the lawyer, producing his card-case, and handing it to the driver.

The man read it by the light of the lamp. 'Mr. Michael Finsbury, 233 King's Road, Chelsea. Is that it, sir?'

'Right you are,' cried Michael, 'drive there if you can see way.'

CHAPTER X

GIDEON FORSYTH AND THE BROADWOOD GRAND

THE reader has perhaps read that remarkable work, *Who Put Back the Clock?* by E. H. B., which appeared for several days upon the railway bookstalls and then vanished entirely from the face of the earth. Whether eating Time makes the chief of his diet out of old editions; whether Providence has passed a special enactment on behalf of authors; or whether these last have taken the law into their own hand, bound themselves into a dark conspiracy with a password, which I would die rather than reveal, and night after night sally forth under some vigorous leader, such as Mr. James Payn or Mr. Walter Besant, on their task of secret spoliation—certain it

is, at least, that the old editions pass, giving place to new. To the proof, it is believed there are now only three copies extant of *Who Put Back the Clock?* one in the British Museum, successfully concealed by a wrong entry in the catalogue; another in one of the cellars (the cellar where the music accumulates) of the Advocates' Library at Edinburgh; and a third, bound in morocco, in the possession of Gideon Forsyth. To account for the very different fate attending this third exemplar, the readiest theory is to suppose that Gideon admired the tale. How to explain that admiration might appear (to those who have perused the work) more difficult; but the weakness of a parent is extreme, and Gideon (and not his uncle, whose initials he had humorously borrowed) was the author of *Who Put Back the Clock?* He had never acknowledged it, or only to some intimate friends while it was still in proof; after its appearance and alarming failure, the modesty of the novelist had become more pressing, and the secret was now likely to be better kept than that of the authorship of *Waverley.*

A copy of the work (for the date of my tale is already yesterday) still figured in dusty solitude in the bookstall at Waterloo; and Gideon, as he passed with his ticket for Hampton Court, smiled contemptuously at the creature of his thoughts. What an idle ambition was the author's! How far beneath him was the practice of that childish art! With his hand closing on his first brief, he felt himself a man at last; and the muse who presides over the police

romance, a lady presumably of French extraction, fled his neighbourhood, and returned to join the dance round the springs of Helicon, among her Grecian sisters.

Robust, practical reflection still cheered the young barrister upon his journey. Again and again he selected the little country-house in its islet of great oaks, which he was to make his future home. Like a prudent householder, he projected improvements as he passed; to one he added a stable, to another a tennis-court, a third he supplied with a becoming rustic boat-house.

'How little a while ago,' he could not but reflect, 'I was a careless young dog with no thought but to be comfortable! I cared for nothing but boating and detective novels. I would have passed an old-fashioned country-house with large kitchen-garden, stabling, boat-house, and spacious offices, without so much as a look, and certainly would have made no inquiry as to the drains. How a man ripens with the years!'

The intelligent reader will perceive the ravages of Miss Hazeltine. Gideon had carried Julia straight to Mr. Bloomfield's house; and that gentleman, having been led to understand she was the victim of oppression, had noisily espoused her cause. He worked himself into a fine breathing heat; in which, to a man of his temperament, action became needful.

'I do not know which is the worse,' he cried, 'the fraudulent old villain or the unmanly young cub. I

will write to the *Pall Mall* and expose them. Nonsense, sir; they must be exposed! It's a public duty. Did you not tell me the fellow was a Tory? O, the uncle is a Radical lecturer, is he? No doubt the uncle has been grossly wronged. But of course, as you say, that makes a change; it becomes scarce so much a public duty.'

And he sought and instantly found a fresh outlet for his alacrity. Miss Hazeltine (he now perceived) must be kept out of the way; his houseboat was lying ready—he had returned but a day or two before from his usual cruise; there was no place like a houseboat for concealment; and that very morning, in the teeth of the easterly gale, Mr. and Mrs. Bloomfield and Miss Julia Hazeltine had started forth on their untimely voyage. Gideon pled in vain to be allowed to join the party. 'No, Gid,' said his uncle. 'You will be watched; you must keep away from us.' Nor had the barrister ventured to contest this strange illusion; for he feared if he rubbed off any of the romance, that Mr. Bloomfield might weary of the whole affair. And his discretion was rewarded; for the Squirradical, laying a heavy hand upon his nephew's shoulder, had added these notable expressions: 'I see what you are after, Gid. But if you 're going to get the girl, you have to work, sir.'

These pleasing sounds had cheered the barrister all day, as he sat reading in chambers; they continued to form the ground-base of his manly musings as he was whirled to Hampton Court; even when he landed at the station, and began to

pull himself together for his delicate interview, the voice of Uncle Ned and the eyes of Julia were not forgotten.

But now it began to rain surprises: in all Hampton Court there was no Kurnaul Villa, no Count Tarnow, and no count. This was strange; but, viewed in the light of the incoherency of his instructions, not perhaps inexplicable; Mr. Dickson had been lunching, and he might have made some fatal oversight in the address. What was the thoroughly prompt, manly, and business-like step? thought Gideon; and he answered himself at once: 'A telegram, very laconic.' Speedily the wires were flashing the following very important missive: 'Dickson, Langham Hotel. Villa and persons both unknown here, suppose erroneous address; follow self next train.—Forsyth.' And at the Langham Hotel, sure enough, with a brow expressive of despatch and intellectual effort, Gideon descended not long after from a smoking hansom.

I do not suppose that Gideon will ever forget the Langham Hotel. No Count Tarnow was one thing; no John Dickson and no Ezra Thomas, quite another. How, why, and what next, danced in his bewildered brain; from every centre of what we playfully call the human intellect incongruous messages were telegraphed; and before the hubbub of dismay had quite subsided, the barrister found himself driving furiously for his chambers. There was at least a cave of refuge; it was at least a place to think in; and he climbed the stair, put his key

in the lock and opened the door, with some approach to hope.

It was all dark within, for the night had some time fallen; but Gideon knew his room, he knew where the matches stood on the end of the chimney-piece; and he advanced boldly, and in so doing dashed himself against a heavy body; where (slightly altering the expressions of the song) no heavy body should have been. There had been nothing there when Gideon went out; he had locked the door behind him, he had found it locked on his return, no one could have entered, the furniture could not have changed its own position. And yet undeniably there was a something there. He thrust out his hands in the darkness. Yes, there was something, something large, something smooth, something cold.

'Heaven forgive me!' said Gideon, 'it feels like a piano.'

And the next moment he remembered the vestas in his waistcoat-pocket and had struck a light.

It was indeed a piano that met his doubtful gaze; a vast and costly instrument, stained with the rains of the afternoon and defaced with recent scratches. The light of the vesta was reflected from the varnished sides, like a star in quiet water; and in the farther end of the room the shadow of that strange visitor loomed bulkily and wavered on the wall.

Gideon let the match burn to his fingers, and the darkness closed once more on his bewilderment.

Then with trembling hands he lit the lamp and drew near. Near or far, there was no doubt of the fact: the thing was a piano. There, where by all the laws of God and man it was impossible that it should be —there the thing impudently stood. Gideon threw open the keyboard and struck a chord. Not a sound disturbed the quiet of the room. 'Is there anything wrong with me?' he thought, with a pang; and drawing in a seat, obstinately persisted in his attempts to ravish silence, now with sparkling arpeggios, now with a sonata of Beethoven's which (in happier days) he knew to be one of the loudest pieces of that powerful composer. Still not a sound. He gave the Broadwood two great bangs with his clenched fist. All was still as the grave.

The young barrister started to his feet.

'I am stark-staring mad,' he cried aloud, 'and no one knows it but myself. God's worst curse has fallen on me.'

His fingers encountered his watch-chain; instantly he had plucked forth his watch and held it to his ear. He could hear it ticking.

'I am not deaf,' he said aloud. 'I am only insane. My mind has quitted me for ever.'

He looked uneasily about the room, and gazed with lack-lustre eyes at the chair in which Mr. Dickson had installed himself. The end of a cigar lay near on the fender.

'No,' he thought, 'I don't believe that was a dream; but God knows my mind is failing rapidly. I seem to be hungry, for instance; it's probably

another hallucination. Still I might try. I shall have one more good meal; I shall go to the Café Royal, and may possibly be removed from there direct to the asylum.'

He wondered with morbid interest, as he descended the stairs, how he would first betray his terrible condition—would he attack a waiter? or eat glass?—and when he had mounted into a cab, he bade the man drive to Nichol's, with a lurking fear that there was no such place.

The flaring, gassy entrance of the café speedily set his mind at rest; he was cheered besides to recognise his favourite waiter; his orders appeared to be coherent; the dinner, when it came, was quite a sensible meal, and he ate it with enjoyment. 'Upon my word,' he reflected, 'I am about tempted to indulge a hope. Have I been hasty? Have I done what Robert Skill would have done?' Robert Skill (I need scarcely mention) was the name of the principal character in *Who Put Back the Clock?* It had occurred to the author as a brilliant and probable invention; to readers of a critical turn, Robert appeared scarce upon a level with his surname; but it is the difficulty of the police romance, that the reader is always a man of such vastly greater ingenuity than the writer. In the eyes of his creator, however, Robert Skill was a word to conjure with; the thought braced and spurred him; what that brilliant creature would have done Gideon would do also. This frame of mind is not uncommon; the distressed general, the

baited divine, the hesitating author, decide severally to do what Napoleon, what St. Paul, what Shakespeare would have done; and there remains only the minor question, What is that? In Gideon's case one thing was clear: Skill was a man of singular decision, he would have taken some step (whatever it was) at once; and the only step that Gideon could think of was to return to his chambers.

This being achieved, all further aspiration failed him, and he stood pitifully staring at the instrument of his confusion. To touch the keys again was more than he durst venture on; whether they had maintained their former silence, or responded with the tones of the last trump, it would have equally dethroned his resolution. 'It may be a practical jest,' he reflected, 'though it seems elaborate and costly. And yet what else can it be? It *must* be a practical jest.' And just then his eye fell upon a feature which seemed corroborative of that view: the pagoda of cigars which Michael had erected ere he left the chambers. 'Why that?' reflected Gideon. 'It seems entirely irresponsible.' And drawing near, he gingerly demolished it. 'A key,' he thought. 'Why that? And why so conspicuously placed?' He made the circuit of the instrument, and perceived the keyhole at the back. 'Aha! this is what the key is for,' said he. 'They wanted me to look inside. Stranger and stranger.' And with that he turned the key and raised the lid.

In what antics of agony, in what fits of flighty resolution, in what collapses of despair, Gideon con-

sumed the night, it would be ungenerous to inquire too closely.

That trill of tiny song with which the eaves-birds of London welcome the approach of day found him limp and rumpled and bloodshot, and with a mind still vacant of resource. He rose and looked forth unrejoicingly on blinded windows, an empty street, and the grey daylight dotted with the yellow lamps. There are mornings when the city seems to awake with a sick headache; this was one of them; and still the twittering reveillé of the sparrows stirred in Gideon's spirit.

'Day here,' he thought, 'and I still helpless! This must come to an end.' And he locked up the piano, put the key in his pocket, and set forth in quest of coffee. As he went, his mind trudged for the hundredth time a certain mill-road of terrors, misgivings, and regrets. To call in the police, to give up the body, to cover London with handbills describing John Dickson and Ezra Thomas, to fill the papers with paragraphs, *Mysterious Occurrence in the Temple—Mr. Forsyth admitted to bail*, this was one course, an easy course, a safe course; but not, the more he reflected on it, not a pleasant one. For, was it not to publish abroad a number of singular facts about himself? A child ought to have seen through the story of these adventurers, and he had gaped and swallowed it. A barrister of the least self-respect should have refused to listen to clients who came before him in a manner so irregular, and he had listened. And O, if he had

only listened; but he had gone upon their errand—he, a barrister, uninstructed even by the shadow of a solicitor—upon an errand fit only for a private detective; and alas!—and for the hundredth time the blood surged to his brow—he had taken their money! 'No,' said he, 'the thing is as plain as St. Paul's. I shall be dishonoured! I have smashed my career for a five-pound note.'

Between the possibility of being hanged in all innocence, and the certainty of a public and merited disgrace, no gentleman of spirit could long hesitate. After three gulps of that hot, snuffy, and muddy beverage, that passes on the streets of London for a decoction of the coffee berry, Gideon's mind was made up. He would do without the police. He must face the other side of the dilemma, and be Robert Skill in earnest. What would Robert Skill have done? How does a gentleman dispose of a dead body, honestly come by? He remembered the inimitable story of the hunchback; reviewed its course, and dismissed it for a worthless guide. It was impossible to prop a corpse on the corner of Tottenham Court Road without arousing fatal curiosity in the bosoms of the passers-by; as for lowering it down a London chimney, the physical obstacles were insurmountable. To get it on board a train and drop it out, or on the top of an omnibus and drop it off, were equally out of the question. To get it on a yacht and drop it overboard, was more conceivable; but for a man of moderate means it seemed extravagant. The hire of the yacht was

in itself a consideration; the subsequent support of the whole crew (which seemed a necessary consequence) was simply not to be thought of. His uncle and the houseboat here occurred in very luminous colours to his mind. A musical composer (say, of the name of Jimson) might very well suffer, like Hogarth's musician before him, from the disturbances of London. He might very well be pressed for time to finish an opera—say the comic opera 'Orange Pekoe'—'Orange Pekoe,' music by Jimson—'this young maëstro, one of the most promising of our recent English school'—vigorous entrance of the drums, etc.—the whole character of Jimson and his music arose in bulk before the mind of Gideon. What more likely than Jimson's arrival with a grand piano (say, at Padwick), and his residence in a houseboat alone with the unfinished score of 'Orange Pekoe'? His subsequent disappearance, leaving nothing behind but an empty piano case, it might be more difficult to account for. And yet even that was susceptible of explanation. For, suppose Jimson had gone mad over a fugal passage, and had thereupon destroyed the accomplice of his infamy, and plunged into the welcome river? What end, on the whole, more probable for a modern musician?

'By Jove, I'll do it,' cried Gideon. 'Jimson is the boy!'

CHAPTER XI

THE MAËSTRO JIMSON

Mr. Edward Hugh Bloomfield having announced his intention to stay in the neighbourhood of Maidenhead, what more probable than that the Maëstro Jimson should turn his mind toward Padwick? Near this pleasant river-side village he remembered to have observed an ancient, weedy houseboat lying moored beside a tuft of willows. It had stirred in him, in his careless hours, as he pulled down the river under a more familiar name, a certain sense of the romantic; and when the nice contrivance of his story was already complete in his mind, he had come near pulling it all down again, like an ungrateful clock, in order to introduce a chapter in which Robert Skill (who was always being decoyed somewhere) should be decoyed on board that lonely hulk by Lord Bellew and the American desperado Gin Sling. It was fortunate he had not done so, he reflected, since the hulk was now required for very different purposes.

Jimson, a man of inconspicuous costume, but insinuating manners, had little difficulty in finding the hireling who had charge of the houseboat, and still less in persuading him to resign his care. The rent was almost nominal, the entry immediate, the key was exchanged against a suitable advance in money, and Jimson returned to town by the afternoon train to see about despatching his piano.

'I will be down to-morrow,' he had said reassuringly. 'My opera is waited for with such impatience, you know.'

And, sure enough, about the hour of noon on the following day, Jimson might have been observed ascending the river-side road that goes from Padwick to Great Haverham, carrying in one hand a basket of provisions, and under the other arm a leather case containing (it is to be conjectured) the score of 'Orange Pekoe.' It was October weather; the stone-grey sky was full of larks, the leaden mirror of the Thames brightened with autumnal foliage, and the fallen leaves of the chestnuts chirped under the composer's footing. There is no time of the year in England more courageous; and Jimson, though he was not without his troubles, whistled as he went.

A little above Padwick the river lies very solitary. On the opposite shore the trees of a private park enclose the view, the chimneys of the mansion just pricking forth above their clusters; on the near side the path is bordered by willows. Close among these lay the houseboat, a thing so soiled by the tears of the overhanging willows, so grown upon with parasites, so decayed, so battered, so neglected, such a haunt of rats, so advertised a storehouse of rheumatic agonies, that the heart of an intending occupant might well recoil. A plank, by way of flying drawbridge, joined it to the shore. And it was a dreary moment for Jimson when he pulled this after him and found himself alone on this unwholesome fortress. He could hear the rats scuttle and flop in the

abhorred interior; the key cried among the wards like a thing in pain; the sitting-room was deep in dust, and smelt strong of bilge-water. It could not be called a cheerful spot, even for a composer absorbed in beloved toil; how much less for a young gentleman haunted by alarms and awaiting the arrival of a corpse!

He sat down, cleared away a piece of the table, and attacked the cold luncheon in his basket. In case of any subsequent inquiry into the fate of Jimson, it was desirable he should be little seen: in other words, that he should spend the day entirely in the house. To this end, and further to corroborate his fable, he had brought in the leather case not only writing materials, but a ream of large-size music paper, such as he considered suitable for an ambitious character like Jimson's.

'And now to work,' said he, when he had satisfied his appetite. 'We must leave traces of the wretched man's activity.' And he wrote in bold characters:

ORANGE PEKOE.

Op. 17.

J. B. JIMSON.

Vocal and p. f. score.

'I suppose they never do begin like this,' reflected Gideon; 'but then it's quite out of the question for me to tackle a full score, and Jimson was so unconventional. A dedication would be found convincing, I believe. "Dedicated to" (let me see) "to

William Ewart Gladstone, by his obedient servant the composer." And now some music: I had better avoid the overture; it seems to present difficulties. Let 's give an air for the tenor: key—O, something modern!—seven sharps.' And he made a business-like signature across the staves, and then paused and browsed for a while on the handle of his pen. Melody, with no better inspiration than a sheet of paper, is not usually found to spring unbidden in the mind of the amateur; nor is the key of seven sharps a place of much repose to the untried. He cast away that sheet. 'It will help to build up the character of Jimson,' Gideon remarked, and again waited on the muse, in various keys and on divers sheets of paper, but all with results so inconsiderable that he stood aghast. 'It 's very odd,' thought he. 'I seem to have less fancy than I thought, or this is an off day with me; yet Jimson must leave something.' And again he bent himself to the task.

Presently the penetrating chill of the houseboat began to attack the very seat of life. He desisted from his unremunerative trial, and, to the audible annoyance of the rats, walked briskly up and down the cabin. Still he was cold. 'This is all nonsense,' said he. 'I don't care about the risk, but I will not catch a catarrh. I must get out of this den.'

He stepped on deck, and passing to the bow of his embarkation, looked for the first time up the river. He started. Only a few hundred yards above another houseboat lay moored among the willows. It was very spick-and-span, an elegant canoe hung

at the stern, the windows were concealed by snowy curtains, a flag floated from a staff. The more Gideon looked at it, the more there mingled with his disgust a sense of impotent surprise. It was very like his uncle's houseboat; it was exceedingly like—it was identical. But for two circumstances, he could have sworn it was the same. The first, that his uncle had gone to Maidenhead, might be explained away by that flightiness of purpose which is so common a trait among the more than usually manly. The second, however, was conclusive: it was not in the least like Mr. Bloomfield to display a banner on his floating residence; and if he ever did, it would certainly be dyed in hues of emblematical propriety. Now the Squirradical, like the vast majority of the more manly, had drawn knowledge at the wells of Cambridge—he was wooden spoon in the year 1850; and the flag upon the houseboat streamed on the afternoon air with the colours of that seat of Toryism, that cradle of Puseyism, that home of the inexact and the effete—Oxford.

Still it was strangely like, thought Gideon.

And as he thus looked and thought, the door opened, and a young lady stepped forth on deck. The barrister dropped and fled into his cabin—it was Julia Hazeltine! Through the window he watched her draw in the canoe, get on board of it, cast off, and come dropping down stream in his direction.

'Well, all is up now,' said he, and he fell on a seat.

'Good-afternoon, miss,' said a voice on the water. Gideon knew it for the voice of his landlord.

'Good-afternoon,' replied Julia, 'but I don't know who you are; do I? O yes, I do though. You are the nice man that gave us leave to sketch from the old houseboat.'

Gideon's heart leaped with fear.

'That's it,' returned the man. 'And what I wanted to say was as you couldn't do it any more. You see I've let it.'

'Let it!' cried Julia.

'Let it for a month,' said the man. 'Seems strange, don't it? Can't see what the party wants with it!'

'It seems very romantic of him, I think,' said Julia. 'What sort of a person is he?'

Julia in her canoe, the landlord in his wherry, were close alongside, and holding on by the gunwale of the houseboat; so that not a word was lost on Gideon.

'He's a music-man,' said the landlord, 'or at least that's what he told me, miss; come down here to write an op'ra.'

'Really!' cried Julia, 'I never heard of anything so delightful! Why, we shall be able to slip down at night and hear him improvise! What is his name?'

'Jimson,' said the man.

'Jimson?' repeated Julia, and interrogated her memory in vain. But indeed our rising school of English music boasts so many professors that we

rarely hear of one till he is made a baronet. 'Are you sure you have it right?'

'Made him spell it to me,' replied the landlord. 'J-I-M-S-O-N—Jimson; and his op'ra 's called—some kind of tea.'

'*Some kind of tea*'! cried the girl. 'What a very singular name for an opera! 'What can it be about?' And Gideon heard her pretty laughter flow abroad. 'We must try to get acquainted with this Mr. Jimson; I feel sure he must be nice.'

'Well, miss, I 'mafraid I must be going on. I 've got to be at Haverham, you see.'

'O, don't let me keep you, you kind man!' said Julia. 'Good-afternoon.'

'Good-afternoon to you, miss.'

Gideon sat in the cabin a prey to the most harrowing thoughts. Here he was anchored to a rotting houseboat, soon to be anchored to it still more emphatically by the presence of the corpse, and here was the country buzzing about him, and young ladies already proposing pleasure parties to surround his house at night. Well, that meant the gallows; and much he cared for that. What troubled him now was Julia's indescribable levity. That girl would scrape acquaintance with anybody; she had no reserve, none of the enamel of the lady. She was familiar with a brute like his landlord; she took an immediate interest (which she lacked even the delicacy to conceal) in a creature like Jimson! He could conceive her asking Jimson to have tea with

her! And it was for a girl like this that a man like Gideon—— Down, manly heart!

He was interrupted by a sound that sent him whipping behind the door in a trice. Miss Hazeltine had stepped on board the houseboat. Her sketch was promising; judging from the stillness, she supposed Jimson not yet come; and she had decided to seize occasion and complete the work of art. Down she sat therefore in the bow, produced her block and water-colours, and was soon singing over (what used to be called) the ladylike accomplishment. Now and then indeed her song was interrupted, as she searched in her memory for some of the odious little receipts by means of which the game is practised—or used to be practised in the brave days of old; they say the world, and those ornaments of the world, young ladies, are become more sophisticated now; but Julia had probably studied under Pitman, and she stood firm in the old ways.

Gideon, meanwhile, stood behind the door, afraid to move, afraid to breathe, afraid to think of what must follow, racked by confinement and borne to the ground with tedium. This particular phase, he felt with gratitude, could not last for ever; whatever impended (even the gallows, he bitterly and perhaps erroneously reflected) could not fail to be a relief. To calculate cubes occurred to him as an ingenious and even profitable refuge from distressing thoughts, and he threw his manhood into that dreary exercise.

Thus, then, were these two young persons occu-

pied—Gideon attacking the perfect number with resolution; Julia vigorously stippling incongruous colours on her block, when Providence despatched into these waters a steam-launch asthmatically panting up the Thames. All along the banks the water swelled and fell, and the reeds rustled. The houseboat itself, that ancient stationary creature, became suddenly imbued with life, and rolled briskly at her moorings, like a sea-going ship when she begins to smell the harbour bar. The wash had nearly died away, and the quick panting of the launch sounded already faint and far off, when Gideon was startled by a cry from Julia. Peering through the window, he beheld her staring disconsolately down stream at the fast-vanishing canoe. The barrister (whatever were his faults) displayed on this occasion a promptitude worthy of his hero, Robert Skill; with one effort of his mind he foresaw what was about to follow; with one movement of his body he dropped to the floor and crawled under the table.

Julia, on her part, was not yet alive to her position. She saw she had lost the canoe, and she looked forward with something less than avidity to her next interview with Mr. Bloomfield; but she had no idea that she was imprisoned, for she knew of the plank bridge.

She made the circuit of the house, and found the door open and the bridge withdrawn. It was plain, then, that Jimson must have come; plain, too, that he must be on board. He must be a very shy man

to have suffered this invasion of his residence, and made no sign; and her courage rose higher at the thought. He must come now, she must force him from his privacy, for the plank was too heavy for her single strength; so she tapped upon the open door. Then she tapped again.

'Mr. Jimson,' she cried, 'Mr. Jimson! here, come!—you *must* come, you know, sooner or later, for I can't get off without you. O, don't be so exceedingly silly! O, please, come!'

Still there was no reply.

'If he *is* here he must be mad,' she thought, with a little fear. And the next moment she remembered he had probably gone aboard like herself in a boat. In that case she might as well see the houseboat, and she pushed open the door and stepped in. Under the table, where he lay smothered with dust, Gideon's heart stood still.

There were the remains of Jimson's lunch. 'He likes rather nice things to eat,' she thought. 'O, I am sure he is quite a delightful man. I wonder if he is as good-looking as Mr. Forsyth. Mrs. Jimson—I don't believe it sounds as nice as Mrs. Forsyth; but then "Gideon" is so really odious! And here is some of his music too; this is delightful. "Orange Pekoe"—O, that's what he meant by some kind of tea.' And she trilled with laughter. '*Adagio molto espressivo, sempre legato*,' she read next. (For the literary part of a composer's business Gideon was well equipped.) 'How very strange to have all these directions, and only

three or four notes! O, here's another with some more. *Andante patetico.*' And she began to glance over the music. 'O dear me,' she thought, 'he must be terribly modern! It all seems discords to me. Let's try the air. It is very strange, it seems familiar.' She began to sing it, and suddenly broke off with laughter. 'Why, it's "Tommy make room for your Uncle"!' she cried aloud, so that the soul of Gideon was filled with bitterness. '*Andante patetico*, indeed! The man must be a mere impostor.'

And just at this moment there came a confused, scuffling sound from underneath the table; a strange note, like that of a barn-door fowl, ushered in a most explosive sneeze; the head of the sufferer was at the same time brought smartly in contact with the boards above; and the sneeze was followed by a hollow groan.

Julia fled to the door, and there, with the salutary instinct of the brave, turned and faced the danger. There was no pursuit. The sounds continued; below the table a crouching figure was indistinctly to be seen jostled by the throes of a sneezing-fit; and that was all.

'Surely,' thought Julia, 'this is most unusual behaviour. He cannot be a man of the world!'

Meanwhile the dust of years had been disturbed by the young barrister's convulsions; and the sneezing-fit was succeeded by a passionate access of coughing.

Julia began to feel a certain interest. 'I am

afraid you are really quite ill,' she said, drawing a little nearer. 'Please don't let me put you out, and do not stay under that table, Mr. Jimson. Indeed it cannot be good for you.'

Mr. Jimson only answered by a distressing cough; and the next moment the girl was on her knees, and their faces had almost knocked together under the table.

'O my gracious goodness!' exclaimed Miss Hazeltine, and sprang to her feet. 'Mr. Forsyth gone mad!'

'I am not mad,' said the gentleman ruefully, extricating himself from his position. 'Dearest Miss Hazeltine, I vow to you upon my knees I am not mad!'

'You are not!' she cried, panting.

'I know,' he said, 'that to a superficial eye my conduct may appear unconventional.'

'If you are not mad, it was no conduct at all,' cried the girl, with a flash of colour, 'and showed you did not care one penny for my feelings!'

'This is the very devil and all. I know—I admit that,' cried Gideon, with a great effort of manly candour.

'It was abominable conduct!' said Julia, with energy.

'I know it must have shaken your esteem,' said the barrister. 'But, dearest Miss Hazeltine, I beg of you to hear me out; my behaviour, strange as it may seem, is not unsusceptible of explanation; and I positively cannot and will not consent to continue

to try to exist without—without the esteem of one whom I admire—the moment is ill chosen, I am well aware of that; but I repeat the expression—one whom I admire.'

A touch of amusement appeared on Miss Hazeltine's face. 'Very well,' said she, 'come out of this dreadfully cold place, and let us sit down on deck.' The barrister dolefully followed her. 'Now,' said she, making herself comfortable against the end of the house, 'go on. I will hear you out.' And then, seeing him stand before her with so much obvious disrelish to the task, she was suddenly overcome with laughter. Julia's laugh was a thing to ravish lovers; she rolled her mirthful descant with the freedom and the melody of a blackbird's song upon the river, and repeated by the echoes of the farther bank. It seemed a thing in its own place and a sound native to the open air. There was only one creature who heard it without joy, and that was her unfortunate admirer.

'Miss Hazeltine,' he said, in a voice that tottered with annoyance, 'I speak as your sincere well-wisher, but this can only be called levity.'

Julia made great eyes at him.

'I can't withdraw the word,' he said: 'already the freedom with which I heard you hobnobbing with a boatman gave me exquisite pain. Then there was a want of reserve about Jimson——'

'But Jimson appears to be yourself,' objected Julia.

'I am far from denying that,' cried the barrister,

'but you did not know it at the time. What could Jimson be to you? Who was Jimson? Miss Hazeltine, it cut me to the heart.'

'Really this seems to me to be very silly,' returned Julia, with severe decision. 'You have behaved in the most extraordinary manner; you pretend you are able to explain your conduct, and instead of doing so you begin to attack me.'

'I am well aware of that,' replied Gideon. 'I—I will make a clean breast of it. When you know all the circumstances you will be able to excuse me.'

And sitting down beside her on the deck, he poured forth his miserable history.

'O, Mr. Forsyth,' she cried, when he had done, 'I am—so—sorry! I wish I hadn't laughed at you—only you know you really were so exceedingly funny. But I wish I hadn't, and I wouldn't either if I had only known.' And she gave him her hand.

Gideon kept it in his own. 'You do not think the worse of me for this?' he asked tenderly.

'Because you have been so silly and got into such dreadful trouble? you poor boy, no!' cried Julia; and, in the warmth of the moment, reached him her other hand; 'you may count on me,' she added.

'Really?' said Gideon.

'Really and really!' replied the girl.

'I do then, and I will,' cried the young man. 'I admit the moment is not well chosen; but I have no friends—to speak of.'

'No more have I,' said Julia. 'But don't you think it 's perhaps time you gave me back my hands?'

'*La ci darem la mano*,' said the barrister, 'the merest moment more! I have so few friends,' he added.

'I thought it was considered such a bad account of a young man to have no friends,' observed Julia.

'O, but I have crowds of *friends*!' cried Gideon. 'That's not what I mean. I feel the moment is ill chosen; but O, Julia, if you could only see yourself!'

'Mr. Forsyth——'

'Don't call me by that beastly name!' cried the youth. 'Call me Gideon!'

'O, never that!' from Julia. 'Besides, we have known each other such a short time.'

'Not at all!' protested Gideon. 'We met at Bournemouth ever so long ago. I never forgot you since. Say you never forgot me. Say you never forgot me, and call me Gideon!'

'Isn't this rather—a want of reserve about Jimson?' inquired the girl.

'O, I know I am an ass,' cried the barrister, 'and I don't care a halfpenny! I know I'm an ass, and you may laugh at me to your heart's delight.' And as Julia's lips opened with a smile, he once more dropped into music. 'There's the Land of Cherry Isle!' he sang, courting her with his eyes.

'It's like an opera,' said Julia, rather faintly.

'What should it be?' said Gideon. 'Am I not Jimson? It would be strange if I did not serenade my love. O yes, I mean the word, my Julia; and I mean to win you. I am in dreadful trouble, and I

have not a penny of my own, and I have cut the silliest figure; and yet I mean to win you, Julia. Look at me, if you can, and tell me no!'

She looked at him; and whatever her eyes may have told him, it is to be supposed he took a pleasure in the message, for he read it a long while.

'And Uncle Ned will give us some money to go on upon in the meanwhile,' he said at last.

'Well, I call that cool!' said a cheerful voice at his elbow.

Gideon and Julia sprang apart with wonderful alacrity; the latter annoyed to observe that although they had never moved since they sat down, they were now quite close together; both presenting faces of a very heightened colour to the eyes of Mr. Edward Hugh Bloomfield. That gentleman, coming up the river in his boat, had captured the truant canoe, and divining what had happened, had thought to steal a march upon Miss Hazeltine at her sketch. He had unexpectedly brought down two birds with one stone; and as he looked upon the pair of flushed and breathless culprits, the pleasant human instinct of the matchmaker softened his heart.

'Well, I call that cool,' he repeated; 'you seem to count very securely upon Uncle Ned. But look here, Gid, I thought I had told you to keep away?'

'To keep away from Maidenhead,' replied Gid. 'But how should I expect to find you here?'

'There is something in that,' Mr. Bloomfield admitted. 'You see I thought it better that even

you should be ignorant of my address; those rascals, the Finsburys, would have wormed it out of you. And just to put them off the scent I hoisted these abominable colours. But that is not all, Gid; you promised me to work, and here I find you playing the fool at Padwick.'

'Please, Mr. Bloomfield, you must not be hard on Mr. Forsyth,' said Julia. 'Poor boy, he is in dreadful straits.'

'What's this, Gid?' inquired the uncle. 'Have you been fighting? or is it a bill?'

These, in the opinion of the Squirradical, were the two misfortunes incident to gentlemen; and indeed both were culled from his own career. He had once put his name (as a matter of form) on a friend's paper; it had cost him a cool thousand; and the friend had gone about with the fear of death upon him ever since, and never turned a corner without scouting in front of him for Mr. Bloomfield and the oaken staff. As for fighting, the Squirradical was always on the brink of it; and once, when (in the character of president of a Radical club) he had cleared out the hall of his opponents, things had gone even further. Mr. Holtum, the Conservative candidate, who lay so long on the bed of sickness, was prepared to swear to Mr. Bloomfield. 'I will swear to it in any court—it was the hand of that brute that struck me down,' he was reported to have said; and when he was thought to be sinking, it was known that he had made an *ante-mortem* statement in that sense. It was a cheerful day for the

Squirradical when Holtum was restored to his brewery.

'It's much worse than that,' said Gideon; 'a combination of circumstances really providentially unjust—a—in fact, a syndicate of murderers seem to have perceived my latent ability to rid them of the traces of their crime. It's a legal study after all, you see!' And with these words, Gideon, for the second time that day, began to describe the adventures of the Broadwood Grand.

'I must write to the *Times*,' cried Mr. Bloomfield.

'Do you want to get me disbarred?' asked Gideon.

'Disbarred! Come, it can't be as bad as that,' said his uncle. 'It's a good, honest, Liberal Government that's in, and they would certainly move at my request. Thank God, the days of Tory jobbery are at an end.'

'It wouldn't do, Uncle Ned,' said Gideon.

'But you're not mad enough,' cried Mr. Bloomfield, 'to persist in trying to dispose of it yourself?'

'There is no other path open to me,' said Gideon.

'It's not common sense, and I will not hear of it,' cried Mr. Bloomfield. 'I command you, positively, Gid, to desist from this criminal interference.'

'Very well, then, I hand it over to you,' said Gideon, 'and you can do what you like with the dead body.'

'God forbid!' ejaculated the president of the Radical Club, 'I'll have nothing to do with it.'

'Then you must allow me to do the best I can,' returned his nephew. 'Believe me, I have a distinct talent for this sort of difficulty.'

'We might forward it to that pest-house, the Conservative Club,' observed Mr. Bloomfield. 'It might damage them in the eyes of their constituents; and it could be profitably worked up in the local journal.'

'If you see any political capital in the thing,' said Gideon, 'you may have it for me.'

'No, no, Gid—no, no, I thought *you* might. I will have no hand in the thing. On reflection, it's highly undesirable that either I or Miss Hazeltine should linger here. We might be observed,' said the president, looking up and down the river; 'and in my public position the consequences would be painful for the party. And, at any rate, it's dinner-time.'

'What?' cried Gideon, plunging for his watch. 'And so it is! Great heaven, the piano should have been here hours ago!'

Mr. Bloomfield was clambering back into his boat; but at these words he paused.

'I saw it arrive myself at the station; I hired a carrier man; he had a round to make, but he was to be here by four at the latest,' cried the barrister. 'No doubt the piano is open, and the body found.'

'You must fly at once,' cried Mr. Bloomfield, 'it's the only manly step.'

'But suppose it's all right?' wailed Gideon. 'Suppose the piano comes, and I am not here to

receive it? I shall have hanged myself by my cowardice. No, Uncle Ned, inquiries must be made in Padwick; I dare not go, of course; but you may —you could hang about the police office, don't you see?'

'No, Gid—no, my dear nephew,' said Mr. Bloomfield, with the voice of one on the rack. 'I regard you with the most sacred affection; and I thank God I am an Englishman—and all that. But not—not the police, Gid.'

'Then you desert me?' said Gideon. 'Say it plainly.'

'Far from it! far from it!' protested Mr. Bloomfield. 'I only propose caution. Common-sense, Gid, should always be an Englishman's guide.'

'Will you let me speak?' said Julia. 'I think Gideon had better leave this dreadful houseboat, and wait among the willows over there. If the piano comes, then he could step out and take it in; and if the police come, he could slip into our houseboat, and there needn't be any more Jimson at all. He could go to bed, and we could burn his clothes (couldn't we?) in the steam-launch; and then really it seems as if it would be all right. Mr. Bloomfield is so respectable, you know, and such a leading character, it would be quite impossible even to fancy that he could be mixed up with it.'

'This young lady has strong common-sense,' said the Squirradical.

'O, I don't think I'm at all a fool,' said Julia, with conviction.

'But what if neither of them come?' asked Gideon; 'what shall I do then?'

'Why then,' said she, 'you had better go down to the village after dark; and I can go with you, and then I am sure you could never be suspected; and even if you were, I could tell them it was altogether a mistake.'

'I will not permit that—I will not suffer Miss Hazeltine to go,' cried Mr. Bloomfield.

'Why?' asked Julia.

Mr. Bloomfield had not the least desire to tell her why, for it was simply a craven fear of being drawn himself into the imbroglio; but with the usual tactics of a man who is ashamed of himself, he took the high hand. 'God forbid, my dear Miss Hazeltine, that I should dictate to a lady on the question of propriety——' he began.

'O, is that all?' interrupted Julia. 'Then we must go all three.'

'Caught!' thought the Squirradical.

CHAPTER XII

POSITIVELY THE LAST APPEARANCE OF THE BROADWOOD GRAND

ENGLAND is supposed to be unmusical; but without dwelling on the patronage extended to the organ-grinder, without seeking to found any argument on the prevalence of the Jew's trump, there is surely one instrument that may be said to be national in the

fullest acceptance of the word. The herdboy in the broom, already musical in the days of Father Chaucer, startles (and perhaps pains) the lark with this exiguous pipe; and in the hands of the skilled bricklayer,

> The thing becomes a trumpet, whence he blows

(as a general rule) either 'The British Grenadiers,' or 'Cherry Ripe.' The latter air is indeed the shibboleth and diploma piece of the penny whistler; I hazard a guess it was originally composed for this instrument. It is singular enough that a man should be able to gain a livelihood, or even to tide over a period of unemployment, by the display of his proficiency upon the penny whistle; still more so, that the professional should almost invariably confine himself to 'Cherry Ripe.' But indeed, singularities surround the subject, thick like blackberries. Why, for instance, should the pipe be called a penny whistle? I think no one ever bought it for a penny. Why should the alternative name be tin whistle? I am grossly deceived if it be made of tin. Lastly, in what deaf catacomb, in what earless desert, does the beginner pass the excruciating interval of his apprenticeship? We have all heard people learning the piano, the fiddle, and the cornet; but the young of the penny whistler (like that of the salmon) is occult from observation; he is never heard until proficient; and Providence (perhaps alarmed by the works of Mr. Mallock) defends human hearing from his first attempts upon the upper octave.

A really noteworthy thing was taking place in a green lane, not far from Padwick. On the bench of a carrier's cart there sat a tow-headed, lanky, modest-looking youth; the reins were on his lap; the whip lay behind him in the interior of the cart; the horse proceeded without guidance or encouragement; the carrier (or the carrier's man), rapt into a higher sphere than that of his daily occupations, his looks dwelling on the skies, devoted himself wholly to a brand-new D penny whistle, whence he diffidently endeavoured to elicit that pleasing melody 'The Ploughboy.' To any observant person who should have chanced to saunter in that lane, the hour would have been thrilling. 'Here at last,' he would have said, 'is the beginner.'

The tow-headed youth (whose name was Harker) had just encored himself for the nineteenth time, when he was struck into the extreme of confusion by the discovery that he was not alone.

'There you have it!' cried a manly voice from the side of the road. 'That 's as good as I want to hear. Perhaps a leetle oilier in the run,' the voice suggested, with meditative gusto. 'Give it us again.'

Harker glanced, from the depths of his humiliation, at the speaker. He beheld a powerful, sun-brown, clean-shaven fellow, about forty years of age, striding beside the cart with a non-commissioned military bearing, and (as he strode) spinning in the air a cane. The fellow's clothes were very bad, but he looked clean and self-reliant.

'I 'm only a beginner,' gasped the blushing

Harker, 'I didn't think anybody could hear me.'

'Well, I like that!' returned the other. 'You 're a pretty old beginner. Come, I 'll give you a lead myself. Give us a seat here beside you.'

The next moment the military gentleman was perched on the cart, pipe in hand. He gave the instrument a knowing rattle on the shaft, mouthed it, appeared to commence for a moment with the muse, and dashed into 'The girl I left behind me.' He was a great, rather than a fine, performer; he lacked the bird-like richness; he could scarce have extracted all the honey out of 'Cherry Ripe'; he did not fear—he even ostentatiously displayed and seemed to revel in—the shrillness of the instrument; but in fire, speed, precision, evenness, and fluency; in linked agility of *jimmy*—a technical expression, by your leave, answering to *warblers* on the bagpipe; and perhaps, above all, in that inspiring side-glance of the eye, with which he followed the effect and (as by a human appeal) eked out the insufficiency of his performance: in these, the fellow stood without a rival. Harker listened: 'The girl I left behind me' filled him with despair; 'The Soldier's Joy' carried him beyond jealousy into generous enthusiasm.

'Turn about,' said the military gentleman, offering the pipe.

'O, not after you!' cried Harker; 'you 're a professional.'

'No,' said his companion; 'an amatyure like yourself. That 's one style of play, yours is the other,

and I like it best. But I began when I was a boy, you see, before my taste was formed. When you 're my age you 'll play that thing like a cornet-à-piston. Give us that air again; how does it go?' and he affected to endeavour to recall 'The Ploughboy.'

A timid, insane hope sprang in the breast of Harker. Was it possible? Was there something in his playing? It had, indeed, seemed to him at times as if he got a kind of a richness out of it. Was he a genius? Meantime the military gentleman stumbled over the air.

'No,' said the unhappy Harker, 'that 's not quite it. It goes this way—just to show you.'

And, taking the pipe between his lips, he sealed his doom. When he had played the air, and then a second time, and a third; when the military gentleman had tried it once more, and once more failed; when it became clear to Harker that he, the blushing débutant, was actually giving a lesson to this full-grown flutist—and the flutist under his care was not very brilliantly progressing—how am I to tell what floods of glory brightened the autumnal countryside; how, unless the reader were an amateur himself, describe the heights of idiotic vanity to which the carrier climbed? One significant fact shall paint the situation: thenceforth it was Harker who played, and the military gentleman listened and approved.

As he listened, however, he did not forget the habit of soldierly precaution, looking both behind

and before. He looked behind and computed the value of the carrier's load, divining the contents of the brown-paper parcels and the portly hamper, and briefly setting down the grand piano in the brand-new piano-case as 'difficult to get rid of.' He looked before, and spied at the corner of the green lane a little country public-house embowered in roses. 'I 'll have a shy at it,' concluded the military gentleman, and roundly proposed a glass.

'Well, I 'm not a drinking man,' said Harker.

'Look here, now,' cut in the other, 'I 'll tell you who I am: I 'm Colour-Sergeant Brand of the Blankth. That 'll tell you if I 'm a drinking man or not.' It might and it might not, thus a Greek chorus would have intervened, and gone on to point out how very far it fell short of telling why the sergeant was tramping a country lane in tatters; or even to argue that he must have pretermitted some while ago his labours for the general defence, and (in the interval) possibly turned his attention to oakum. But there was no Greek chorus present; and the man of war went on to contend that drinking was one thing and a friendly glass another.

In the Blue Lion, which was the name of the country public-house, Colour-Sergeant Brand introduced his new friend, Mr. Harker, to a number of ingenious mixtures, calculated to prevent the approaches of intoxication. These he explained to be 'rekisite' in the service, so that a self-respecting officer should always appear upon parade in a condition honourable to his corps. The most efficacious

of these devices was to lace a pint of mild ale with twopence-worth of London gin. I am pleased to hand in this recipe to the discerning reader, who may find it useful even in civil station ; for its effect upon Mr. Harker was revolutionary. He must be helped on board his own waggon, where he proceeded to display a spirit entirely given over to mirth and music, alternately hooting with laughter, to which the sergeant hastened to bear chorus, and incoherently tootling on the pipe. The man of war, meantime, unostentatiously possessed himself of the reins. It was plain he had a taste for the secluded beauties of an English landscape; for the cart, although it wandered under his guidance for some time, was never observed to issue on the dusty highway, journeying between hedge and ditch, and for the most part under overhanging boughs. It was plain, besides, he had an eye to the true interests of Mr. Harker; for though the cart drew up more than once at the doors of public-houses, it was only the sergeant who set foot to ground, and, being equipped himself with a quart bottle, once more proceeded on his rural drive.

To give any idea of the complexity of the sergeant's course, a map of that part of Middlesex would be required, and my publisher is averse from the expense. Suffice it, that a little after the night had closed, the cart was brought to a standstill in a woody road; where the sergeant lifted from among the parcels, and tenderly deposited upon the wayside, the inanimate form of Harker.

'If you come-to before daylight,' thought the sergeant, 'I shall be surprised for one.'

From the various pockets of the slumbering carrier he gently collected the sum of seventeen shillings and eightpence sterling; and, getting once more into the cart, drove thoughtfully away.

'If I was exactly sure of where I was, it would be a good job,' he reflected. 'Anyway, here's a corner.'

He turned it, and found himself upon the riverside. A little above him the lights of a houseboat shone cheerfully; and already close at hand, so close that it was impossible to avoid their notice, three persons, a lady and two gentlemen, were deliberately drawing near. The sergeant put his trust in the convenient darkness of the night, and drove on to meet them. One of the gentlemen, who was of a portly figure, walked in the midst of the fairway, and presently held up a staff by way of signal.

'My man, have you seen anything of a carrier's cart?' he cried.

Dark as it was, it seemed to the sergeant as though the slimmer of the two gentlemen had made a motion to prevent the other speaking, and (finding himself too late) had skipped aside with some alacrity. At another season, Sergeant Brand would have paid more attention to the fact; but he was then immersed in the perils of his own predicament.

'A carrier's cart?' said he, with a perceptible uncertainty of voice. 'No, sir.'

'Ah!' said the portly gentleman, and stood aside to let the sergeant pass. The lady appeared to bend forward and study the cart with every mark of sharpened curiosity, the slimmer gentleman still keeping in the rear.

'I wonder what the devil they would be at,' thought Sergeant Brand; and, looking fearfully back, he saw the trio standing together in the midst of the way, like folk consulting. The bravest of military heroes are not always equal to themselves as to their reputation; and fear, on some singular provocation, will find a lodgment in the most unfamiliar bosom. The word 'detective' might have been heard to gurgle in the sergeant's throat; and vigorously applying the whip, he fled up the river-side road to Great Haverham, at the gallop of the carrier's horse. The lights of the houseboat flashed upon the flying waggon as it passed; the beat of hoofs and the rattle of the vehicle gradually coalesced and died away; and presently, to the trio on the river-side, silence had redescended.

'It's the most extraordinary thing,' cried the slimmer of the two gentlemen, 'but that's the cart!'

'And I know I saw a piano,' said the girl.

'O, it's the cart, certainly; and the extraordinary thing is, it's not the man,' added the first.

'It must be the man, Gid, it must be,' said the portly one.

'Well, then, why is he running away?' asked Gideon.

'His horse bolted, I suppose,' said the Squirradical.

'Nonsense! I heard the whip going like a flail,' said Gideon. 'It simply defies the human reason.'

'I 'll tell you,' broke in the girl, 'he came round that corner. Suppose we went and—what do you call it in books?—followed his trail? There may be a house there, or somebody who saw him, or something.'

'Well, suppose we did, for the fun of the thing, said Gideon.

The fun of the thing (it would appear) consisted in the extremely close juxtaposition of himself and Miss Hazeltine. To Uncle Ned, who was excluded from these simple pleasures, the excursion appeared hopeless from the first; and when a fresh perspective of darkness opened up, dimly contained between park palings on the one side and a hedge and ditch upon the other, the whole without the smallest signal of human habitation, the Squirradical drew up.

'This is a wild-goose chase,' said he.

With the cessation of the footfalls, another sound smote upon their ears.

'O, what 's that?' cried Julia.

'I can't think,' said Gideon.

The Squirradical had his stick presented like a sword. 'Gid,' he began, 'Gid, I——'

'O Mr. Forsyth!' cried the girl. 'O don't go forward, you don't know what it might be; it might be something perfectly horrid.'

'It may be the devil itself,' said Gideon, disengaging himself, 'but I am going to see it.'

'Don't be rash, Gid,' cried his uncle.

The barrister drew near to the sound, which was certainly of a portentous character. In quality it appeared to blend the strains of the cow, the fog-horn, and the mosquito; and the startling manner of its enunciation added incalculably to its terrors. A dark object, not unlike the human form divine, appeared on the brink of the ditch.

'It's a man,' said Gideon, 'it's only a man; he seems to be asleep and snoring.—Hullo,' he added, a moment after, 'there must be something wrong with him, he won't waken.'

Gideon produced his vestas, struck one, and by its light recognised the tow head of Harker.

'This is the man,' said he, 'as drunk as Belial. I see the whole story'; and to his two companions, who had now ventured to rejoin him, he set forth a theory of the divorce between the carrier and his cart, which was not unlike the truth.

'Drunken brute!' said Uncle Ned, 'let's get him to a pump and give him what he deserves.'

'Not at all,' said Gideon. 'It is highly undesirable he should see us together; and really, do you know, I am very much obliged to him, for this is about the luckiest thing that could have possibly occurred. It seems to me—Uncle Ned, I declare to heaven it seems to me—I'm clear of it!'

'Clear of what?' asked the Squirradical.

'The whole affair!' cried Gideon. 'That man has been ass enough to steal the cart and the dead body; what he hopes to do with it I neither know

nor care. My hands are free, Jimson ceases; down with Jimson. Shake hands with me, Uncle Ned—Julia, darling girl, Julia, I——'

'Gideon, Gideon!' said his uncle.

'O, it's all right, uncle, when we're going to be married so soon,' said Gideon. 'You know you said so yourself in the houseboat.'

'Did I?' said Uncle Ned; 'I am certain I said no such thing.'

'Appeal to him, tell him he did, get on his soft side,' cried Gideon. 'He's a real brick if you get on his soft side.'

'Dear Mr. Bloomfield,' said Julia, 'I know Gideon will be such a very good boy, and he has promised me to do such a lot of law, and I will see that he does too. And you know it is so very steadying to young men, everybody admits that; though, of course, I know I have no money, Mr. Bloomfield,' she added.

'My dear young lady, as this rapscallion told you to-day on the boat, Uncle Ned has plenty,' said the Squirradical, 'and I can never forget that you have been shamefully defrauded. So as there's nobody looking, you had better give your uncle Ned a kiss. There, you rogue,' resumed Mr. Bloomfield, when the ceremony had been daintily performed, 'this very pretty young lady is yours, and a vast deal more than you deserve. But now, let us get back to the houseboat, get up steam on the launch, and away back to town.'

'That's the thing!' cried Gideon; 'and to-

morrow there will be no houseboat, and no Jimson, and no carrier's cart, and no piano; and when Harker awakes on the ditch-side he may tell himself the whole affair has been a dream.'

'Aha!' said Uncle Ned, 'but there's another man who will have a different awakening. That fellow in the cart will find he has been too clever by half.'

'Uncle Ned and Julia,' said Gideon, 'I am as happy as the King of Tartary, my heart is like a threepenny-bit, my heels are like feathers; I am out of all my troubles, Julia's hand is in mine. Is this a time for anything but handsome sentiments? Why, there's not room in me for anything that's not angelic! And when I think of that poor unhappy devil in the cart, I stand here in the night and cry with a single heart—God help him!'

'Amen,' said Uncle Ned.

CHAPTER XIII

THE TRIBULATIONS OF MORRIS
PART THE SECOND

In a really polite age of literature I would have scorned to cast my eye again on the contortions of Morris. But the study is in the spirit of the day; it presents, besides, features of a high, almost a repulsive, morality; and if it should prove the means of preventing any respectable and inexperienced gentleman from plunging light-heartedly into crime,

even political crime, this work will not have been penned in vain.

He rose on the morrow of his night with Michael, rose from the leaden slumber of distress, to find his hand tremulous, his eyes closed with rheum, his throat parched, and his digestion obviously paralysed. 'Lord knows it's not from eating!' Morris thought; and as he dressed he reconsidered his position under several heads. Nothing will so well depict the troubled seas in which he was now voyaging as a review of these various anxieties. I have thrown them (for the reader's convenience) into a certain order; but in the mind of one poor human equal they whirled together like the dust of hurricanes. With the same obliging preoccupation I have put a name to each of his distresses; and it will be observed with pity that every individual item would have graced and commended the cover of a railway novel.

Anxiety the First: *Where is the Body? or, The Mystery of Bent Pitman.* It was now manifestly plain that Bent Pitman (as was to be looked for from his ominous appellation) belonged to the darker order of the criminal class. An honest man would not have cashed the bill; a humane man would not have accepted in silence the tragic contents of the water-butt; a man, who was not already up to the hilts in gore, would have lacked the means of secretly disposing them. This process of reasoning left a horrid image of the monster, Pitman. Doubtless he had long ago disposed of the body—dropping it

through a trap-door in his back kitchen, Morris supposed, with some hazy recollection of a picture in a penny dreadful; and doubtless the man now lived in wanton splendour on the proceeds of the bill. So far, all was peace. But with the profligate habits of a man like Bent Pitman (who was no doubt a hunchback in the bargain), eight hundred pounds could be easily melted in a week. When they were gone, what would he be likely to do next? A hell-like voice in Morris's own bosom gave the answer; 'Blackmail me.'

Anxiety the Second: *The Fraud of the Tontine; or, Is my Uncle dead?* This, on which all Morris's hopes depended, was yet a question. He had tried to bully Teena; he had tried to bribe her; and nothing came of it. He had his moral conviction still; but you cannot blackmail a sharp lawyer on a moral conviction. And besides, since his interview with Michael, the idea wore a less attractive countenance. Was Michael the man to be blackmailed? and was Morris the man to do it? Grave considerations. 'It 's not that I 'm afraid of him,' Morris so far condescended to reassure himself; 'but I must be very certain of my ground, and the deuce of it is, I see no way. How unlike is life to novels! I wouldn't have even begun this business in a novel, but what I 'd have met a dark, slouching fellow in the Oxford Road, who 'd have become my accomplice, and known all about how to do it, and probably broken into Michael's house at night and found nothing but a waxwork image; and then black-

mailed or murdered me. But here, in real life, I might walk the streets till I dropped dead, and none of the criminal classes would look near me. Though, to be sure, there is always Pitman,' he added thoughtfully.

Anxiety the Third: *The Cottage at Browndean; or, The Underpaid Accomplice.* For he had an accomplice, and that accomplice was blooming unseen in a damp cottage in Hampshire with empty pockets. What could be done about that? He really ought to have sent him something; if it was only a post-office order for five bob, enough to prove that he was kept in mind, enough to keep him in hope, beer, and tobacco. 'But what would you have?' thought Morris; and ruefully poured into his hand a half-crown, a florin, and eightpence in small change. For a man in Morris's position, at war with all society, and conducting, with the hand of inexperience, a widely ramified intrigue, the sum was already a derision. John would have to be doing; no mistake of that. 'But then,' asked the hell-like voice, 'how long is John likely to stand it?'

Anxiety the Fourth: *The Leather Business; or, The Shutters at Last: a Tale of the City.* On this head Morris had no news. He had not yet dared to visit the family concern; yet he knew he must delay no longer, and if anything had been wanted to sharpen this conviction, Michael's references of the night before rang ambiguously in his ear. Well and good. To visit the city might be indispensable;

but what was he to do when he was there? He had no right to sign in his own name; and, with all the will in the world, he seemed to lack the art of signing with his uncle's. Under these circumstances, Morris could do nothing to procrastinate the crash; and when it came, when prying eyes began to be applied to every joint of his behaviour, two questions could not fail to be addressed, sooner or later, to a speechless and perspiring insolvent. Where is Mr. Joseph Finsbury? and how about your visit to the bank? Questions, how easy to put!—ye gods, how impossible to answer! The man to whom they should be addressed went certainly to jail, and—eh! what was this?—possibly to the gallows. Morris was trying to shave when this idea struck him, and he laid the razor down. Here (in Michael's words) was the total disappearance of a valuable uncle; here was a time of inexplicable conduct on the part of a nephew who had been in bad blood with the old man any time these seven years; what a chance for a judicial blunder! 'But no,' thought Morris, 'they cannot, they dare not, make it murder. Not that. But honestly, and speaking as a man to a man, I don't see any other crime in the calendar (except arson) that I don't seem somehow to have committed. And yet I 'm a perfectly respectable man, and wished nothing but my due. Law is a pretty business.'

With this conclusion firmly seated in his mind, Morris Finsbury descended to the hall of the house in John Street, still half-shaven. There was a

letter in the box; he knew the handwriting: John at last!

'Well, I think I might have been spared this,' he said bitterly, and tore it open.

'Dear Morris,' it ran, 'what the dickens do you mean by it? I'm in an awful hole down here; I have to go on tick, and the parties on the spot don't cotton to the idea; they couldn't, because it is so plain I'm in a stait of Destitution. I've got no bed-clothes, think of that, I must have coins, the hole thing's a Mockry, I wont stand it, nobody would. I would have come away before, only I have no money for the railway fare. Don't be a lunatic, Morris, you don't seem to understand my dredful situation. I have to get the stamp on tick. A fact.—Ever your affte. Brother, J. FINSBURY.'

'Can't even spell!' Morris reflected, as he crammed the letter in his pocket, and left the house. 'What can I do for him? I have to go to the expense of a barber, I'm so shattered! How can I send anybody coins? It's hard lines, I daresay; but does he think I'm living on hot muffins? One comfort,' was his grim reflection, 'he can't cut and run—he's got to stay; he's as helpless as the dead.' And then he broke forth again: 'Complains, does he? and he's never even heard of Bent Pitman! If he had what I have on my mind, he might complain with a good grace.'

But these were not honest arguments, or not wholly honest; there was a struggle in the mind of Morris; he could not disguise from himself that his brother John was miserably situated at Browndean, without news, without money, without bed-clothes,

without society or any entertainment; and by the time he had been shaved and picked a hasty breakfast at a coffee tavern, Morris had arrived at a compromise.

'Poor Johnny,' he said to himself, 'he's in an awful box! I can't send him coins, but I'll tell you what I'll do: I'll send him the *Pink Un*—it'll cheer John up; and besides, it'll do his credit good getting anything by post.'

Accordingly, on his way to the leather business, whither he proceeded (according to his thrifty habit) on foot, Morris purchased and despatched a single copy of that enlivening periodical, to which (in a sudden pang of remorse) he added at random the *Athenæum*, the *Revivalist*, and the *Penny Pictorial Weekly*. So there was John set up with literature, and Morris had laid balm upon his conscience.

As if to reward him, he was received in his place of business with good news. Orders were pouring in; there was a run on some of the back stock, and the figure had gone up. Even the manager appeared elated. As for Morris, who had almost forgotten the meaning of good news, he longed to sob like a little child; he could have caught the manager (a pallid man with startled eyebrows) to his bosom; he could have found it in his generosity to give a cheque (for a small sum) to every clerk in the counting-house. As he sat and opened his letters a chorus of airy vocalists sang in his brain, to most exquisite music, 'This old concern may be profitable yet, profitable yet, profitable yet.'

To him, in this sunny moment of relief, enter a Mr. Rodgerson, a creditor, but not one who was expected to be pressing, for his connection with the firm was old and regular.

'O, Finsbury,' said he, not without embarrassment, 'it's of course only fair to let you know—the fact is, money is a trifle tight—I have some paper out—for that matter, every one's complaining—and in short——'

'It has never been our habit, Rodgerson,' said Morris, turning pale. 'But give me time to turn round, and I'll see what I can do; I daresay we can let you have something to account.'

'Well, that's just where it is,' replied Rodgerson. 'I was tempted; I've let the credit out of my hands.'

'Out of your hands?' repeated Morris. 'That's playing rather fast and loose with us, Mr. Rodgerson.'

'Well, I got cent. for cent. for it,' said the other, 'on the nail, in a certified cheque.'

'Cent. for cent.!' cried Morris. 'Why, that's something like thirty per cent. bonus; a singular thing! Who's the party?'

'Don't know the man,' was the reply. 'Name of Moss.'

'A Jew,' Morris reflected, when his visitor was gone. And what could a Jew want with a claim of—he verified the amount in the books—a claim of three five eight, nineteen, ten, against the house of Finsbury? And why should he pay cent. for cent.?

The figure proved the loyalty of Rodgerson—even Morris admitted that. But it proved unfortunately something else—the eagerness of Moss. The claim must have been wanted instantly, for that day, for that morning even. Why? The mystery of Moss promised to be a fit pendant to the mystery of Pitman. 'And just when all was looking well too!' cried Morris, smiting his hand upon the desk. And almost at the same moment Mr. Moss was announced.

Mr. Moss was a radiant Hebrew, brutally handsome and offensively polite. He was acting, it appeared, for a third party; he understood nothing of the circumstances; his client desired to have his position regularised; but he would accept an antedated cheque—antedated by two months, if Mr. Finsbury chose.

'But I don't understand this,' said Morris. 'What made you pay cent. per cent. for it to-day?'

Mr. Moss had no idea; only his orders.

'The whole thing is thoroughly irregular,' said Morris. 'It is not the custom of the trade to settle at this time of the year. What are your instructions if I refuse?'

'I am to see Mr. Joseph Finsbury, the head of the firm,' said Mr. Moss. 'I was directed to insist on that; it was implied you had no status here—the expressions are not mine.'

'You cannot see Mr. Joseph; he is unwell,' said Morris.

'In that case I was to place the matter in the

hands of a lawyer. Let me see,' said Mr. Moss, opening a pocket-book with, perhaps, suspicious care, at the right place—'Yes—of Mr. Michael Finsbury. A relation, perhaps? In that case, I presume, the matter will be pleasantly arranged.'

To pass into the hands of Michael was too much for Morris. He struck his colours. A cheque at two months was nothing, after all. In two months he would probably be dead, or in a jail at any rate. He bade the manager give Mr. Moss a chair and the paper. 'I 'm going over to get a cheque signed by Mr. Finsbury,' said he, 'who is lying ill at John Street.'

A cab there and a cab back; here were inroads on his wretched capital! He counted the cost; when he was done with Mr. Moss he would be left with twelvepence-halfpenny in the world. What was even worse, he had now been forced to bring his uncle up to Bloomsbury. 'No use for poor Johnny in Hampshire now,' he reflected. 'And how the farce is to be kept up completely passes me. At Browndean it was just possible; in Bloomsbury it seems beyond human ingenuity—though I suppose it 's what Michael does. But then he has accomplices—that Scotsman and the whole gang. Ah, if I had accomplices!'

Necessity is the mother of the arts. Under a spur so immediate, Morris surprised himself by the neatness and despatch of his new forgery, and within three-fourths of an hour had handed it to Mr. Moss.

'That is very satisfactory,' observed that gentleman, rising. 'I was to tell you it will not be presented, but you had better take care.'

The room swam round Morris. 'What—what's that!' he cried, grasping the table. He was miserably conscious the next moment of his shrill tongue and ashen face. 'What do you mean—it will not be presented? Why am I to take care? What is all this mummery?'

'I have no idea, Mr. Finsbury,' replied the smiling Hebrew. 'It was a message I was to deliver. The expressions were put into my mouth."

'What is your client's name?' asked Morris.

'That is a secret for the moment,' answered Mr. Moss.

Morris bent toward him. 'It's not the bank?' he asked hoarsely.

'I have no authority to say more, Mr. Finsbury,' returned Mr. Moss. 'I will wish you a good-morning, if you please.'

'Wish me a good-morning!' thought Morris; and the next moment, seizing his hat, he fled from his place of business like a madman. Three streets away he stopped and groaned. 'Lord! I should have borrowed from the manager!' he cried. 'But it's too late now; it would look dicky to go back; I'm penniless — simply penniless — like the unemployed.'

He went home and sat in the dismantled dining-room with his head in his hands. Newton never thought harder than this victim of circumstance,

and yet no clearness came. 'It may be a defect in my intelligence,' he cried, rising to his feet, 'but I cannot see that I am fairly used. The bad luck I've had is a thing to write to the *Times* about; it's enough to breed a revolution. And the plain English of the whole thing is that I must have money at once. I'm done with all morality now; I'm long past that stage; money I must have, and the only chance I see is Bent Pitman. Bent Pitman is a criminal, and therefore his position's weak. He must have some of that eight hundred left; if he has I'll force him to go shares; and even if he hasn't, I'll tell him the tontine affair, and with a desperate man like Pitman at my back, it'll be strange if I don't succeed.'

Well and good. But how to lay hands upon Bent Pitman, except by advertisement, was not so clear. And even so, in what terms to ask a meeting? on what grounds? and where? Not at John Street, for it would never do to let a man like Bent Pitman know your real address; nor yet at Pitman's house, some dreadful place in Holloway, with a trap-door in the back kitchen; a house which you might enter in a light summer overcoat and varnished boots, to come forth again piecemeal in a market-basket. That was the drawback of a really efficient accomplice, Morris felt, not without a shudder. 'I never dreamed I should come to actually covet such society,' he thought. And then a brilliant idea struck him. Waterloo Station, a public place, yet at certain hours of the day a solitary; a place, besides, the

very name of which must knock upon the heart of Pitman, and at once suggest a knowledge of the latest of his guilty secrets. Morris took a piece of paper and sketched his advertisement.

'WILLIAM BENT PITMAN, if this should meet the eye of, he will hear of SOMETHING TO HIS ADVANTAGE on the far end of the main line departure platform, Waterloo Station, 2 to 4 P.M., Sunday next.'

Morris reperused this literary trifle with approbation. 'Terse,' he reflected. 'Something to his advantage is not strictly true; but it's taking and original, and a man is not on oath in an advertisement. All that I require now is the ready cash for my own meals and for the advertisement,—and—no, I can't lavish money upon John, but I'll give him some more papers. How to raise the wind?'

He approached his cabinet of signets, and the collector suddenly revolted in his blood. 'I will not!' he cried; 'nothing shall induce me to massacre my collection—rather theft!' And dashing up-stairs to the drawing-room, he helped himself to a few of his uncle's curiosities: a pair of Turkish babooshes, a Smyrna fan, a water-cooler, a musket guaranteed to have been seized from an Ephesian bandit, and a pocketful of curious but incomplete sea-shells.

CHAPTER XIV

WILLIAM BENT PITMAN HEARS OF SOMETHING TO HIS ADVANTAGE

On the morning of Sunday, William Dent Pitman rose at his usual hour, although with something more than the usual reluctance. The day before (it should be explained) an addition had been made to his family in the person of a lodger. Michael Finsbury had acted sponsor in the business, and guaranteed the weekly bill; on the other hand, no doubt with a spice of his prevailing jocularity, he had drawn a depressing portrait of the lodger's character. Mr. Pitman had been led to understand his guest was not good company; he had approached the gentleman with fear, and had rejoiced to find himself the entertainer of an angel. At tea he had been vastly pleased; till hard on one in the morning he had sat entranced by eloquence and progressively fortified with information in the studio; and now, as he reviewed over his toilet the harmless pleasures of the evening, the future smiled upon him with revived attractions. 'Mr. Finsbury is indeed an acquisition,' he remarked to himself; and as he entered the little parlour, where the table was already laid for breakfast, the cordiality of his greeting would have befitted an acquaintanceship already old.

'I am delighted to see you, sir'—these were his expressions—'and I trust you have slept well.'

'Accustomed as I have been for so long to a life of almost perpetual change,' replied the guest, 'the disturbance so often complained of by the more sedentary, as attending their first night in (what is called) a new bed, is a complaint from which I am entirely free.'

'I am delighted to hear it,' said the drawing-master warmly. 'But I see I have interrupted you over the paper.'

'The Sunday paper is one of the features of the age,' said Mr. Finsbury. 'In America, I am told, it supersedes all other literature, the bone and sinew of the nation finding their requirements catered for; hundreds of columns will be occupied with interesting details of the world's doings, such as water-spouts, elopements, conflagrations, and public entertainments; there is a corner for politics, ladies' work, chess, religion, and even literature; and a few spicy editorials serve to direct the course of public thought. It is difficult to estimate the part played by such enormous and miscellaneous repositories in the education of the people. But this (though interesting in itself) partakes of the nature of a digression; and what I was about to ask you was this: Are you yourself a student of the daily press?'

'There is not much in the papers to interest an artist,' returned Pitman.

'In that case,' resumed Joseph, 'an advertisement which has appeared the last two days in various journals, and reappears this morning, may possibly have failed to catch your eye. The name, with a

trifling variation, bears a strong resemblance to your own. Ah, here it is. If you please, I will read it to you :—

'"WILLIAM BENT PITMAN, if this should meet the eye of, he will hear of SOMETHING TO HIS ADVANTAGE at the far end of the main line departure platform, Waterloo Station, 2 to 4 P.M. to-day."'

'Is that in print?' cried Pitman. 'Let me see it! Bent? It must be Dent! *Something to my advantage*? Mr. Finsbury, excuse me offering a word of caution; I am aware how strangely this must sound in your ears, but there are domestic reasons why this little circumstance might perhaps be better kept between ourselves. Mrs. Pitman—my dear sir, I assure you there is nothing dishonourable in my secrecy; the reasons are domestic, merely domestic; and I may set your conscience at rest when I assure you all the circumstances are known to our common friend, your excellent nephew, Mr. Michael, who has not withdrawn from me his esteem.'

'A word is enough, Mr. Pitman,' said Joseph, with one of his Oriental reverences.

Half an hour later, the drawing-master found Michael in bed and reading a book, the picture of good-humour and repose.

'Hillo, Pitman,' he said, laying down his book, 'what brings you here at this inclement hour? Ought to be in church, my boy!'

'I have little thought of church to-day, Mr. Finsbury,' said the drawing-master. 'I am on the

brink of something new, sir.' And he presented the advertisement.

'Why, what is this?' cried Michael, sitting suddenly up. He studied it for half a minute with a frown. 'Pitman, I don't care about this document a particle,' said he.

'It will have to be attended to, however,' said Pitman.

'I thought you'd had enough of Waterloo,' returned the lawyer. 'Have you started a morbid craving? You've never been yourself anyway since you lost that beard. I believe now it was where you kept your senses.'

'Mr. Finsbury,' said the drawing-master, 'I have tried to reason this matter out, and, with your permission, I should like to lay before you the results.'

'Fire away,' said Michael; 'but please, Pitman, remember it's Sunday, and let's have no bad language.'

'There are three views open to us,' began Pitman. 'First, this may be connected with the barrel; second, it may be connected with Mr. Semitopolis's statue; and third, it may be from my wife's brother, who went to Australia. In the first case, which is of course possible, I confess the matter would be best allowed to drop.'

'The court is with you there, Brother Pitman,' said Michael.

'In the second,' continued the other, 'it is plainly my duty to leave no stone unturned for the recovery of the lost antique.'

'My dear fellow, Semitopolis has come down like a trump; he has pocketed the loss and left you the profit. What more would you have?' inquired the lawyer.

'I conceive, sir, under correction, that Mr. Semitopolis's generosity binds me to even greater exertion,' said the drawing-master. 'The whole business was unfortunate; it was—I need not disguise it from you—it was illegal from the first: the more reason that I should try to behave like a gentleman,' concluded Pitman, flushing.

'I have nothing to say to that,' returned the lawyer. 'I have sometimes thought I should like to try to behave like a gentleman myself; only it's such a one-sided business, with the world and the legal profession as they are.'

'Then, in the third,' resumed the drawing-master, 'if it's Uncle Tim, of course, our fortune's made.'

'It's not Uncle Tim, though,' said the lawyer.

'Have you observed that very remarkable expression: *Something to his advantage*'? inquired Pitman shrewdly.

'You innocent mutton,' said Michael, 'it's the seediest commonplace in the English language, and only proves the advertiser is an ass. Let me demolish your house of cards for you at once. Would Uncle Tim make that blunder in your name?—in itself, the blunder is delicious, a huge improvement on the gross reality, and I mean to adopt it in the future; but is it like Uncle Tim?'

'No, it 's not like him,' Pitman admitted. 'But his mind may have become unhinged at Ballarat.'

'If you come to that, Pitman,' said Michael, 'the advertiser *may* be Queen Victoria, fired with the desire to make a duke of you. I put it to yourself if that 's probable; and yet it 's not against the laws of nature. But we sit here to consider probabilities; and with your genteel permission, I eliminate Her Majesty and Uncle Tim on the threshold. To proceed, we have your second idea, that this has some connection with the statue. Possible; but in that case who is the advertiser? Not Ricardi, for he knows your address; not the person who got the box, for he doesn't know your name. The vanman, I hear you suggest, in a lucid interval. He might have got your name, and got it incorrectly, at the station; and he might have failed to get your address. I grant the vanman. But a question: Do you really wish to meet the vanman?'

'Why should I not?' asked Pitman.

'If he wants to meet you,' replied Michael, 'observe this: it is because he has found his address-book, has been to the house that got the statue, and —mark my words!—is moving at the instigation of the murderer.'

'I should be very sorry to think so,' said Pitman; 'but I still consider it my duty to Mr. Semitopolis . . .'

'Pitman,' interrupted Michael, 'this will not do. Don't seek to impose on your legal adviser; don't try to pass yourself off for the Duke of Wellington, for

that is not your line. Come, I wager a dinner I can read your thoughts. You still believe it 's Uncle Tim.

'Mr. Finsbury,' said the drawing-master, colouring, 'you are not a man in narrow circumstances, and you have no family. Guendolen is growing up, a very promising girl—she was confirmed this year; and I think you will be able to enter into my feelings as a parent when I tell you she is quite ignorant of dancing. The boys are at the board school, which is all very well in its way; at least, I am the last man in the world to criticise the institutions of my native land. But I had fondly hoped that Harold might become a professional musician; and little Otho shows a quite remarkable vocation for the Church. I am not exactly an ambitious man . . .'

'Well, well,' interrupted Michael. 'Be explicit; you think it 's Uncle Tim.'

'It might be Uncle Tim,' insisted Pitman, 'and if it were, and I neglected the occasion, how could I ever look my children in the face? I do not refer to Mrs. Pitman . . .'

'No, you never do,' said Michael.

'. . . but in the case of her own brother returning from Ballarat . . .' continued Pitman.

'. . . with his mind unhinged,' put in the lawyer.

'. . . returning from Ballarat with a large fortune, her impatience may be more easily imagined than described,' concluded Pitman.

'All right,' said Michael, 'be it so. And what do you propose to do?'

'I am going to Waterloo,' said Pitman, 'in disguise.'

'All by your little self?' inquired the lawyer. 'Well, I hope you think it safe. Mind and send me word from the police cells.'

'O, Mr. Finsbury, I had ventured to hope—perhaps you might be induced to—to make one of us,' faltered Pitman.

'Disguise myself on Sunday?' cried Michael. 'How little you understand my principles!'

'Mr. Finsbury, I have no means of showing you my gratitude; but let me ask you one question,' said Pitman. 'If I were a very rich client, would you not take the risk?'

'Diamond, Diamond, you know not what you do!' cried Michael. 'Why, man, do you suppose I make a practice of cutting about London with my clients in disguise? Do you suppose money would induce me to touch this business with a stick? I give you my word of honour, it would not. But I own I have a real curiosity to see how you conduct this interview—that tempts me; it tempts me, Pitman, more than gold—it should be exquisitely rich.' And suddenly Michael laughed. 'Well, Pitman,' said he, 'have all the truck ready in the studio. I'll go.'

About twenty minutes after two, on this eventful day, the vast and gloomy shed of Waterloo lay, like the temple of a dead religion, silent and deserted. Here and there, at one of the platforms, a train lay becalmed; here and there a wandering footfall

echoed; the cab-horses outside stamped with startling reverberations on the stones; or from the neighbouring wilderness of railway an engine snorted forth a whistle. The main-line departure platform slumbered like the rest; the booking-hutches closed; the backs of Mr. Haggard's novels, with which upon a week-day the bookstall shines emblazoned, discreetly hidden behind dingy shutters; the rare officials, undisguisedly somnambulant; and the customary loiterers, even to the middle-aged woman with the ulster and the handbag, fled to more congenial scenes. As in the inmost dells of some small tropic island the throbbing of the ocean lingers, so here a faint pervading hum and trepidation told in every corner of surrounding London.

At the hour already named, persons acquainted with John Dickson, of Ballarat, and Ezra Thomas, of the United States of America, would have been cheered to behold them enter through the booking-office.

'What names are we to take?' inquired the latter, anxiously adjusting the window-glass spectacles which he had been suffered on this occasion to assume.

'There's no choice for you, my boy,' returned Michael. 'Bent Pitman or nothing. As for me, I think I look as if I might be called Appleby; something agreeably old-world about Appleby—breathes of Devonshire cider. Talking of which, suppose you wet your whistle? the interview is likely to be trying.'

'I think I'll wait till afterwards,' returned Pitman;

'on the whole, I think I'll wait till the thing's over. I don't know if it strikes you as it does me; but the place seems deserted and silent, Mr. Finsbury, and filled with very singular echoes.'

'Kind of Jack-in-the-box feeling?' inquired Michael, 'as if all these empty trains might be filled with policemen waiting for a signal? and Sir Charles Warren perched among the girders with a silver whistle to his lips? It's guilt, Pitman.'

In this uneasy frame of mind they walked nearly the whole length of the departure platform, and at the western extremity became aware of a slender figure standing backed against a pillar. The figure was plainly sunk into a deep abstraction; he was not aware of their approach, but gazed far abroad over the sunlit station. Michael stopped.

'Holloa!' said he, 'can that be your advertiser? If so, I'm done with it.' And then, on second thoughts: 'Not so, either,' he resumed more cheerfully. 'Here, turn your back a moment. So. Give me the specs.'

'But you agreed I was to have them,' protested Pitman.

'Ah, but that man knows me,' said Michael.

'Does he? what's his name?' cried Pitman.

'O, he took me into his confidence,' returned the lawyer. 'But I may say one thing: if he's your advertiser (and he may be, for he seems to have been seized with criminal lunacy) you can go ahead with a clear conscience, for I hold him in the hollow of my hand.'

The change effected, and Pitman comforted with this good news, the pair drew near to Morris.

'Are you looking for Mr. William Bent Pitman?' inquired the drawing-master. 'I am he.'

Morris raised his head. He saw before him, in the speaker, a person of almost indescribable insignificance, in white spats and a shirt cut indecently low. A little behind a second and more burly figure offered little to criticism, except ulster, whiskers, spectacles, and deerstalker hat. Since he had decided to call up devils from the underworld of London, Morris had pondered deeply on the probabilities of their appearance. His first emotion, like that of Charoba when she beheld the sea, was one of disappointment; his second did more justice to the case. Never before had he seen a couple dressed like these; he had struck a new stratum.

'I must speak with you alone,' said he.

'You need not mind Mr. Appleby,' returned Pitman. 'He knows all.'

'All? Do you know what I am here to speak of?' inquired Morris. 'The barrel.'

Pitman turned pale, but it was with manly indignation. 'You are the man!' he cried. 'You very wicked person!'

'Am I to speak before him?' asked Morris, disregarding these severe expressions.

'He has been present throughout,' said Pitman. 'He opened the barrel; your guilty secret is already known to him, as well as to your Maker and myself.'

'Well, then,' said Morris, 'what have you done with the money?'

'I know nothing about any money,' said Pitman.

'You needn't try that on,' said Morris. 'I have tracked you down; you came to the station sacrilegiously disguised as a clergyman, procured my barrel, opened it, rifled the body, and cashed the bill. I have been to the bank, I tell you! I have followed you step by step, and your denials are childish and absurd.'

'Come, come, Morris, keep your temper,' said Mr. Appleby.

'Michael!' cried Morris, 'Michael here too!'

'Here too,' echoed the lawyer; 'here and everywhere, my good fellow; every step you take is counted; trained detectives follow you like your shadow; they report to me every three-quarters of an hour; no expense is spared.'

Morris's face took on a hue of dirty grey. 'Well, I don't care; I have the less reserve to keep,' he cried. 'That man cashed my bill; it 's a theft, and I want the money back.'

'Do you think I would lie to you, Morris?' asked Michael.

'I don't know,' said his cousin. 'I want my money.'

'It was I alone who touched the body,' began Michael.

'You? Michael!' cried Morris, starting back. 'Then why haven't you declared the death?'

'What the devil do you mean?' asked Michael.

'Am I mad? or are you?' cried Morris.

'I think it must be Pitman,' said Michael.

The three men stared at each other, wild-eyed.

'This is dreadful,' said Morris, 'dreadful. I do not understand one word that is addressed to me.'

'I give you my word of honour, no more do I,' said Michael.

'And in God's name, why whiskers?' cried Morris, pointing in a ghastly manner at his cousin. 'Does my brain reel? How whiskers?'

'O, that's a matter of detail,' said Michael.

There was another silence, during which Morris appeared to himself to be shot in a trapeze as high as St. Paul's, and as low as Baker Street Station.

'Let us recapitulate,' said Michael, 'unless it's really a dream, in which case I wish Teena would call me for breakfast. My friend Pitman, here, received a barrel which, it now appears, was meant for you. The barrel contained the body of a man. How or why you killed him——'

'I never laid a hand on him,' protested Morris. 'This is what I have dreaded all along. But think, Michael! I'm not that kind of man; with all my faults, I wouldn't touch a hair of anybody's head, and it was all dead loss to me. He got killed in that vile accident.'

Suddenly Michael was seized by mirth so prolonged and excessive that his companions supposed beyond a doubt his reason had deserted him. Again and again he struggled to compose himself, and again and again laughter overwhelmed him like a tide. In

all this maddening interview there had been no more spectral feature than this of Michael's merriment; and Pitman and Morris, drawn together by the common fear, exchanged glances of anxiety.

'Morris,' gasped the lawyer, when he was at last able to articulate, 'hold on, I see it all now. I can make it clear in one word. Here 's the key: *I never guessed it was Uncle Joseph till this moment.*'

This remark produced an instant lightening of the tension for Morris; for Pitman it quenched the last ray of hope and daylight. Uncle Joseph, whom he had left an hour ago in Norfolk Street, pasting newspaper cuttings?—it?—the dead body?—then who was he, Pitman? and was this Waterloo Station or Colney Hatch?

'To be sure!' cried Morris; 'it was badly smashed, I know. How stupid not to think of that! Why, then, all 's clear; and, my dear Michael, I 'll tell you what—we 're saved, both saved. You get the tontine—I don't grudge it you the least—and I get the leather business, which is really beginning to look up. Declare the death at once, don't mind me in the smallest, don't consider me; declare the death, and we 're all right.'

'Ah, but I can't declare it,' said Michael.

'Why not?' cried Morris.

'I can't produce the corpus, Morris. I 've lost it,' said the lawyer.

'Stop a bit,' ejaculated the leather merchant. 'How is this? It 's not possible. I lost it.'

'Well, I 've lost it too, my son,' said Michael, with

extreme serenity. 'Not recognising it, you see, and suspecting something irregular in its origin, I got rid of—what shall we say?—got rid of the proceeds at once.'

'You got rid of the body? What made you do that?' wailed Morris. 'But you can get it again? You know where it is?'

'I wish I did, Morris, and you may believe me there, for it would be a small sum in my pocket; but the fact is, I don't,' said Michael.

'Good Lord,' said Morris, addressing heaven and earth, 'good Lord, I've lost the leather business.'

Michael was once more shaken with laughter.

'Why do you laugh, you fool?' cried his cousin, 'you lose more than I. You've bungled it worse than even I did. If you had a spark of feeling you would be shaking in your boots with vexation. But I'll tell you one thing—I'll have that eight hundred pound—I'll have that and go to Swan River—that's mine, anyway, and your friend must have forged to cash it. Give me the eight hundred, here, upon this platform, or I go straight to Scotland Yard and turn the whole disreputable story inside out.'

'Morris,' said Michael, laying his hand upon his shoulder, 'hear reason. It wasn't us, it was the other man. We never even searched the body.'

'The other man?' repeated Morris.

'Yes, the other man. We palmed Uncle Joseph off upon another man,' said Michael.

'You what? You palmed him off? That's surely a singular expression,' said Morris.

'Yes, palmed him off for a piano,' said Michael with perfect simplicity. 'Remarkably full, rich tone,' he added.

Morris carried his hand to his brow and looked at it; it was wet with sweat. 'Fever,' said he.

'No, it was a Broadwood grand,' said Michael. 'Pitman here will tell you if it was genuine or not.'

'Eh? O! O yes, I believe it was a genuine Broadwood; I have played upon it several times myself,' said Pitman. 'The three-letter E was broken.'

'Don't say anything more about pianos,' said Morris, with a strong shudder; 'I'm not the man I used to be! This—this other man—let's come to him, if I can only manage to follow? Who is he? Where can I get hold of him?'

'Ah, that's the rub,' said Michael. 'He's been in possession of the desired article, let me see—since Wednesday, about four o'clock, and is now, I should imagine, on his way to the isles of Javan and Gadire.'

'Michael,' said Morris pleadingly, 'I am in a very weak state, and I beg your consideration for a kinsman. Say it slowly again, and be sure you are correct. When did he get it?'

Michael repeated his statement.

'Yes, that's the worst thing yet,' said Morris, drawing in his breath.

'What is?' asked the lawyer.

'Even the dates are sheer nonsense,' said the leather merchant. 'The bill was cashed on Tues-

day. There's not a gleam of reason in the whole transaction.'

A young gentleman, who had passed the trio and suddenly started and turned back, at this moment laid a heavy hand on Michael's shoulder.

'Aha, so this is Mr. Dickson?' said he.

The trump of judgment could scarce have rung with a more dreadful note in the ears of Pitman and the lawyer. To Morris this erroneous name seemed a legitimate enough continuation of the nightmare in which he had so long been wandering. And when Michael, with his brand-new bushy whiskers, broke from the grasp of the stranger and turned to run, and the weird little shaven creature in the low-necked shirt followed his example with a bird-like screech, and the stranger (finding the rest of his prey escape him) pounced with a rude grasp on Morris himself, that gentleman's frame of mind might be very nearly expressed in the colloquial phrase: 'I told you so!'

'I have one of the gang,' said Gideon Forsyth.

'I do not understand,' said Morris dully.

'O, I will make you understand,' returned Gideon grimly.

'You will be a good friend to me if you can make me understand anything,' cried Morris, with a sudden energy of conviction.

'I don't know you personally, do I?' continued Gideon, examining his unresisting prisoner. 'Never mind, I know your friends. They are your friends, are they not?'

'I do not understand you,' said Morris.

'You had possibly something to do with a piano?' suggested Gideon.

'A piano?' cried Morris, convulsively clasping Gideon by the arm. 'Then you're the other man! Where is it? Where is the body? And did you cash the draft?'

'Where is the body? This is very strange,' mused Gideon. 'Do you want the body?'

'Want it?' cried Morris. 'My whole fortune depends upon it! I lost it. Where is it? Take me to it!'

'O, you want it, do you? And the other man, Dickson—does he want it?' inquired Gideon.

'Who do you mean by Dickson? O, Michael Finsbury! Why, of course he does! He lost it too. If he had it, he'd have won the tontine to-morrow.'

'Michael Finsbury! Not the solicitor?' cried Gideon.

'Yes, the solicitor,' said Morris. 'But where is the body?'

'Then that is why he sent the brief! What is Mr. Finsbury's private address?' asked Gideon.

'233 King's Road. What brief? Where are you going? Where is the body?' cried Morris, clinging to Gideon's arm.

'I have lost it myself,' returned Gideon, and ran out of the station.

CHAPTER XV

THE RETURN OF THE GREAT VANCE

Morris returned from Waterloo in a frame of mind that baffles description. He was a modest man; he had never conceived an overweening notion of his own powers; he knew himself unfit to write a book, turn a table napkin-ring, entertain a Christmas party with legerdemain—grapple (in short) any of those conspicuous accomplishments that are usually classed under the head of genius. He knew—he admitted—his parts to be pedestrian, but he had considered them (until quite lately) fully equal to the demands of life. And to-day he owned himself defeated: life had the upper hand; if there had been any means of flight or place to flee to, if the world had been so ordered that a man could leave it like a place of entertainment, Morris would have instantly resigned all further claim on its rewards and pleasures, and, with inexpressible contentment, ceased to be. As it was, one aim shone before him: he could get home. Even as the sick dog crawls under the sofa, Morris could shut the door of John Street and be alone.

The dusk was falling when he drew near this place of refuge; and the first thing that met his eyes was the figure of a man upon the step, alternately plucking at the bell-handle and pounding on the panels. The man had no hat, his clothes were

hideous with filth, he had the air of a hop-picker. Yet Morris knew him; it was John.

The first impulse of flight was succeeded, in the elder brother's bosom, by the empty quiescence of despair. 'What does it matter now?' he thought, and drawing forth his latch-key ascended the steps.

John turned about; his face was ghastly with weariness and dirt and fury; and as he recognised the head of his family, he drew in a long rasping breath, and his eyes glittered.

'Open that door,' he said, standing back.

'I am going to,' said Morris, and added mentally, 'He looks like murder!'

The brothers passed into the hall, the door closed behind them; and suddenly John seized Morris by the shoulders and shook him as a terrier shakes a rat. 'You mangy little cad,' he said, 'I'd serve you right to smash your skull!' And shook him again, so that his teeth rattled and his head smote upon the wall.

'Don't be violent, Johnny,' said Morris. 'It can't do any good now.'

'Shut your mouth,' said John, 'your time's come to listen.'

He strode into the dining-room, fell into the easy-chair, and taking off one of his burst walking-shoes, nursed for a while his foot like one in agony. 'I'm lame for life,' he said. 'What is there for dinner?'

'Nothing, Johnny,' said Morris.

'Nothing? What do you mean by that?' in-

quired the Great Vance. 'Don't set up your chat to me!'

'I mean simply nothing,' said his brother. 'I have nothing to eat, and nothing to buy it with. I've only had a cup of tea and a sandwich all this day myself.'

'Only a sandwich?' sneered Vance. 'I suppose *you're* going to complain next. But you had better take care: I've had all I mean to take; and I can tell you what it is, I mean to dine and to dine well. Take your signets and sell them.'

'I can't to-day,' objected Morris; 'it's Sunday.'

'I tell you I'm going to dine!' cried the younger brother.

'But if it's not possible, Johnny?' pleaded the other.

'You nincompoop!' cried Vance. 'Ain't we householders? Don't they know us at that hotel where Uncle Parker used to come? Be off with you; and if you ain't back in half an hour, and if the dinner ain't good, first I'll lick you till you don't want to breathe, and then I'll go straight to the police and blow the gaff. Do you understand that, Morris Finsbury? Because if you do, you had better jump.'

The idea smiled even upon the wretched Morris, who was sick with famine. He sped upon his errand, and returned to find John still nursing his foot in the arm-chair.

'What would you like to drink, Johnny?' he inquired soothingly.

'Fizz,' said John. 'Some of the poppy stuff from the end bin; a bottle of the old port that Michael liked, to follow; and see and don't shake the port. And look here, light the fire—and the gas, and draw down the blinds; it's cold and it's getting dark. And then you can lay the cloth. And, I say—here, you! bring me down some clothes.'

The room looked comparatively habitable by the time the dinner came; and the dinner itself was good: strong gravy soup, fillets of sole, mutton chops and tomato sauce, roast beef done rare with roast potatoes, cabinet pudding, a piece of Chester cheese, and some early celery: a meal uncompromisingly British, but supporting.

'Thank God!' said John, his nostrils sniffing wide, surprised by joy into the unwonted formality of grace. 'Now I'm going to take this chair with my back to the fire—there's been a strong frost these two last nights, and I can't get it out of my bones; the celery will be just the ticket—I'm going to sit here, and you are going to stand there, Morris Finsbury, and play butler.'

'But, Johnny, I'm so hungry myself,' pleaded Morris.

'You can have what I leave,' said Vance. 'You're just beginning to pay your score, my daisy; I owe you one pound ten; don't you rouse the British lion!' There was something indescribably menacing in the face and voice of the Great Vance as he uttered these words, at which the soul of Morris withered. 'There!' resumed the feaster, 'give us a glass of the fizz to

start with. Gravy soup! And I thought I didn't like gravy soup! Do you know how I got here?' he asked, with another explosion of wrath.

'No, Johnny; how could I?' said the obsequious Morris.

'I walked on my ten toes!' cried John; 'tramped the whole way from Browndean; and begged! I would like to see you beg. It's not so easy as you might suppose. I played on it being a shipwrecked mariner from Blyth; I don't know where Blyth is, do you? but I thought it sounded natural. I begged from a little beast of a schoolboy, and he forked out a bit of twine, and asked me to make a clove hitch; I did, too, I know I did, but he said it wasn't, he said it was a granny's knot, and I was a what-d' ye-call'-em, and he would give me in charge. Then I begged from a naval officer—he never bothered me with knots, but he only gave me a tract; there's a nice account of the British navy!—and then from a widow woman that sold lollipops, and I got a hunch of bread from her. Another party I fell in with said you could generally always get bread; and the thing to do was to break a plate-glass window and get into jail; seemed rather a brilliant scheme.—Pass the beef.'

'Why didn't you stay at Browndean?' Morris ventured to inquire.

'Skittles!' said John. 'On what? The *Pink Un* and a measly religious paper? I had to leave Browndean; I had to, I tell you. I got tick at a public, and set up to be the Great Vance; so would

you, if you were leading such a beastly existence! And a card stood me a lot of ale and stuff, and we got swipey, talking about music-halls and the piles of tin I got for singing; and then they got me on to sing "Around her splendid form I weaved the magic circle," and then he said I couldn't be Vance, and I stuck to it like grim death I was. It was rot of me to sing, of course, but I thought I could brazen it out with a set of yokels. It settled my hash at the public,' said John, with a sigh. 'And then the last thing was the carpenter——'

'Our landlord?' inquired Morris.

'That's the party,' said John. 'He came nosing about the place, and then wanted to know where the water-butt was, and the bed-clothes. I told him to go to the devil; so would you too, when there was no possible thing to say! And then he said I had pawned them, and did I know it was felony? Then I made a pretty neat stroke. I remembered he was deaf, and talked a whole lot of rot, very politely, just so low he couldn't hear a word. "I don't hear you," says he. "I know you don't, my buck, and I don't mean you to," says I, smiling away like a haberdasher. "I 'm hard of hearing," he roars. "I 'd be in a pretty hot corner if you weren't," says I, making signs as if I was explaining everything. It was tip-top as long as it lasted. "Well," he said, "I 'm deaf, worse luck, but I bet the constable can hear you." And off he started one way, and I the other. They got a spirit-lamp, and the *Pink Un*, and that old religious paper, and another periodical you

sent me. I think you must have been drunk—it had a name like one of those spots that Uncle Joseph used to hold forth at, and it was all full of the most awful swipes about poetry and the use of the globes. It was the kind of thing that nobody could read out of a lunatic asylum. The "Athæneum," that was the name! Golly, what a paper!'

'*Athenœum*, you mean,' said Morris.

'I don't care what you call it,' said John, 'so as I don't require to take it in! There, I feel better. Now I'm going to sit by the fire in the easy-chair; pass me the cheese, and the celery, and the bottle of port—no, a champagne glass, it holds more. And now you can pitch in; there's some of the fish left and a chop, and some fizz. Ah,' sighed the refreshed pedestrian, 'Michael was right about that port; there's old and vatted for you! Michael's a man I like; he's clever and reads books, and the "Athæneum," and all that; but he's not dreary to meet, he don't talk "Athæneum" like the other parties; why, the most of them would throw a blight over a skittle alley! Talking of Michael, I ain't bored myself to put the question, because of course I knew it from the first. You've made a hash of it, eh?'

'Michael made a hash of it,' said Morris, flushing dark.

'What have we got to do with that?' inquired John.

'He has lost the body, that's what we have to do with it,' cried Morris. 'He has lost the body, and the death can't be established.'

'Hold on,' said John. 'I thought you didn't want to?'

'O, we're far past that,' said his brother. 'It's not the tontine now, it's the leather business, Johnny; it's the clothes upon our back.'

'Stow the slow music,' said John, 'and tell your story from beginning to end.'

Morris did as he was bid.

'Well, now, what did I tell you?' cried the Great Vance, when the other had done. 'But I know one thing: I'm not going to be humbugged out of my property.'

'I should like to know what you mean to do,' said Morris.

'I'll tell you that,' responded John with extreme decision. 'I'm going to put my interests in the hands of the smartest lawyer in London; and whether you go to quod or not is a matter of indifference to me.'

'Why, Johnny, we're in the same boat?' expostulated Morris.

'Are we?' cried his brother. 'I bet we're not! Have I committed forgery? have I lied about Uncle Joseph? have I put idiotic advertisements in the comic papers? have I smashed other people's statues? I like your cheek, Morris Finsbury. No, I've let you run my affairs too long; now they shall go to Michael. I like Michael, any way; and it's time I understood my situation.'

At this moment the brethren were interrupted by a ring at the bell, and Morris, going timorously to

the door, received from the hands of a commissionaire a letter addressed in the hand of Michael. Its contents ran as follows:

'MORRIS FINSBURY, if this should meet the eye of, he will hear of SOMETHING TO HIS ADVANTAGE at my office, in Chancery Lane, at 10 A.M. tomorrow. MICHAEL FINSBURY.'

So utter was Morris's subjection that he did not wait to be asked, but handed the note to John as soon as he had glanced at it himself.

'That's the way to write a letter,' cried John. 'Nobody but Michael could have written that.'

And Morris did not even claim the credit of priority.

CHAPTER XVI

FINAL ADJUSTMENT OF THE LEATHER BUSINESS.

FINSBURY brothers were ushered, at ten the next morning, into a large apartment in Michael's office; the Great Vance, somewhat restored from yesterday's exhaustion, but with one foot in a slipper; Morris, not positively damaged, but a man ten years older than he who had left Bournemouth eight days before, his face ploughed full of anxious wrinkles, his dark hair liberally grizzled at the temples.

Three persons were seated at a table to receive them: Michael in the midst, Gideon Forsyth on his

right hand, on his left an ancient gentleman with spectacles and silver hair.

'By Jingo, it's Uncle Joe!' cried John.

But Morris approached his uncle with a pale countenance and glittering eyes.

'I'll tell you what you did!' he cried. 'You absconded!'

'Good-morning, Morris Finsbury,' returned Joseph, with no less asperity; 'you are looking seriously ill.'

'No use making trouble now,' remarked Michael. 'Look the facts in the face. Your uncle, as you see, was not so much as shaken in the accident; a man of your humane disposition ought to be delighted.'

'Then, if that's so,' Morris broke forth, 'how about the body? You don't mean to insinuate that thing I schemed and sweated for, and colported with my own hands, was the body of a total stranger?'

'O no, we can't go as far as that,' said Michael soothingly; 'you may have met him at the club.'

Morris fell into a chair. 'I would have found it out if it had come to the house,' he complained. 'And why didn't it? why did it go to Pitman? what right had Pitman to open it?'

'If you come to that, Morris, what have you done with the colossal Hercules?' asked Michael.

'He went through it with the meat-axe,' said John. 'It's all in spillikins in the back garden.'

'Well, there's one thing,' snapped Morris;

'there's my uncle again, my fraudulent trustee. He's mine, anyway. And the tontine too. I claim the tontine; I claim it now. I believe Uncle Masterman's dead.'

'I must put a stop to this nonsense,' said Michael, 'and that for ever. You say too near the truth. In one sense your uncle is dead, and has been so long; but not in the sense of the tontine, which it is even on the cards he may yet live to win. Uncle Joseph saw him this morning; he will tell you he still lives, but his mind is in abeyance.'

'He did not know me,' said Joseph; to do him justice, not without emotion.

'So you're out again there, Morris,' said John. 'My eye! what a fool you've made of yourself!'

'And that was why you wouldn't compromise,' said Morris.

'As for the absurd position in which you and Uncle Joseph have been making yourselves an exhibition,' resumed Michael, 'it is more than time it came to an end. I have prepared a proper discharge in full, which you shall sign as a preliminary.'

'What!' cried Morris, 'and lose my seven thousand eight hundred pounds, and the leather business, and the contingent interest, and get nothing? Thank you.'

'It's like you to feel gratitude, Morris,' began Michael.

'O, I know it's no good appealing to you, you sneering devil!' cried Morris. 'But there's a stranger present, I can't think why, and I appeal to

him. I was robbed of that money when I was an orphan, a mere child, at a commercial academy. Since then, I 've never had a wish but to get back my own. You may hear a lot of stuff about me; and there 's no doubt at times I have been ill advised. But it 's the pathos of my situation; that 's what I want to show you.'

'Morris,' interrupted Michael, 'I do wish you would let me add one point, for I think it will affect your judgment. It 's pathetic too—since that 's your taste in literature.'

'Well, what is it?' said Morris.

'It 's only the name of one of the persons who 's to witness your signature, Morris,' replied Michael. 'His name 's Moss, my dear.'

There was a long silence. 'I might have been sure it was you!' cried Morris.

'You 'll sign, won't you?' said Michael.

'Do you know what you 're doing?' cried Morris. 'You 're compounding a felony.'

'Very well, then, we won't compound it, Morris,' returned Michael. 'See how little I understood the sterling integrity of your character! I thought you would prefer it so.'

'Look here, Michael,' said John, 'this is all very fine and large; but how about me? Morris is gone up, I see that; but I 'm not. And I was robbed, too, mind you; and just as much an orphan, and at the blessed same academy as himself.'

'Johnny,' said Michael, 'don't you think you 'd better leave it to me?'

'I'm your man,' said John. 'You wouldn't deceive a poor orphan, I'll take my oath. Morris, you sign that document, or I'll start in and astonish your weak mind.'

With a sudden alacrity, Morris proffered his willingness. Clerks were brought in, the discharge was executed, and there was Joseph a free man once more.

'And now,' said Michael, 'hear what I propose to do. Here, John and Morris, is the leather business made over to the pair of you in partnership. I have valued it at the lowest possible figure, Pogram and Jarris's. And here is a cheque for the balance of your fortune. Now you see, Morris, you start fresh from the commercial academy; and, as you said yourself the leather business was looking up, I suppose you'll probably marry before long. Here's your marriage present—from a Mr. Moss.'

Morris bounded on his cheque with a crimsoned countenance.

'I don't understand the performance,' remarked John. 'It seems too good to be true.'

'It's simply a readjustment,' Michael explained. 'I take up Uncle Joseph's liabilities; and if he gets the tontine, it's to be mine; if my father gets it, it's mine any way, you see. So that I'm rather advantageously placed.'

'Morris, my unconverted friend, you've got left,' was John's comment.

'And now, Mr. Forsyth,' resumed Michael, turning to his silent guests, 'here are all the criminals

before you, except Pitman. I really didn't like to interrupt his scholastic career; but you can have him arrested at the seminary—I know his hours. Here we are then; we're not pretty to look at: what do propose to do with us?'

'Nothing in the world, Mr. Finsbury,' returned Gideon. 'I seem to understand that this gentleman'—indicating Morris—'is the *fons et origo* of the trouble; and, from what I gather, he has already paid through the nose. And really, to be quite frank, I do not see who is to gain by any scandal; not me, at least. And besides, I have to thank you for that brief.'

Michael blushed. 'It was the least I could do to let you have some business,' he said. 'But there 's one thing more. I don't want you to misjudge poor Pitman, who is the most harmless being upon earth. I wish you would dine with me to-night, and see the creature on his native heath—say at Verrey's?'

'I have no engagement, Mr. Finsbury,' replied Gideon. 'I shall be delighted. But subject to your judgment, can we do nothing for the man in the cart? I have qualms of conscience.'

'Nothing but sympathise,' said Michael.

FABLES

The Fable, as a form of literary art, had at all times a great attraction for Mr. Stevenson; and in an early review of Lord Lytton's Fables in Song *he attempted to define some of its proper aims and methods. To this class of work, according to his conception of the matter, belonged essentially several of his own semi-supernatural stories, such as 'Will of the Mill' and 'Markheim'; and even 'Jekyll and Hyde,' wherein there was combined with the dream element, in at least an equal measure, the element of moral allegory or apologue. He was accustomed also to try his hand occasionally on the composition of fables more strictly so called, and cast in the conventional brief and familiar form. By the winter of* 1887-88 *he had enough of these by him, together with a few others running to greater length, and conceived in a more mystic and legendary vein, to enable him, as he thought, to see his way towards making a book of them. Such a book he promised to Messrs. Longman on the occasion of a visit paid him in New York by a member of the firm in the spring of* 1888. *Then came his voyage in the Pacific and residence at Samoa. Among the multitude of new interests and images which filled his mind during the last six years of his life, he seems to have given little thought to the proposed book of fables. One or two, however, as will be seen, were added to the collection during this period. That collection, as it stood at the time of his death, was certainly not what its author had meant it to be. It may even be doubted whether it would have seen the light had he lived: but since his death it has seemed to his representatives of sufficient interest to be handed for publication to Messrs. Longman, in part fulfilment of his old pledge to them; and also to be included in the present volume (the last of the series 'Tales and Fantasies') of the Edinburgh edition.*

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FABLES

I

THE PERSONS OF THE TALE

AFTER the thirty-second chapter of *Treasure Island*, two of the puppets strolled out to have a pipe before business should begin again, and met in an open place not far from the story.

'Good-morning, Cap'n,' said the first, with a man-o'-war salute, and a beaming countenance.

'Ah, Silver!' grunted the other. 'You're in a bad way, Silver.'

'Now, Cap'n Smollett,' remonstrated Silver, 'dooty is dooty, as I knows, and none better; but we're off dooty now; and I can't see no call to keep up the morality business.'

'You're a damned rogue, my man,' said the Captain.

'Come, come, Cap'n, be just,' returned the other. 'There's no call to be angry with me in earnest. I'm on'y a chara'ter in a sea story. I don't really exist.'

'Well, I don't really exist either,' says the Captain, 'which seems to meet that.'

'I wouldn't set no limits to what a virtuous

chara'ter might consider argument,' responded Silver. 'But I 'm the villain of this tale, I am; and speaking as one seafaring man to another, what I want to know is, what 's the odds?'

'Were you never taught your catechism?' said the Captain. 'Don't you know there 's such a thing as an Author?'

'Such a thing as a Author?' returned John derisively. 'And who better 'n me? And the p'int is, if the Author made you, he made Long John, and he made Hands, and Pew, and George Merry—not that George is up to much, for he 's little more 'n a name; and he made Flint, what there is of him; and he made this here mutiny, you keep such a work about; and he had Tom Redruth shot; and—well, if that 's a Author, give me Pew!'

'Don't you believe in a future state?' said Smollett. 'Do you think there 's nothing but the present story-paper?'

'I don't rightly know for that,' said Silver; 'and I don't see what it 's got to do with it, anyway. What I know is this: if there is sich a thing as a Author, I 'm his favourite chara'ter. He does me fathoms better 'n he does you—fathoms, he does. And he likes doing me. He keeps me on deck mostly all the time, crutch and all; and he leaves you measling in the hold, where nobody can't see you, nor wants to, and you may lay to that! If there is a Author, by thunder, but he 's on my side, and you may lay to it!'

'I see he 's giving you a long rope,' said the

Captain. 'But that can't change a man's convictions. I know the Author respects me; I feel it in my bones; when you and I had that talk at the blockhouse door, who do you think he was for, my man?'

'And don't he respect me?' cried Silver. 'Ah, you should 'a' heard me putting down my mutiny, George Merry and Morgan and that lot, no longer ago 'n last chapter; you 'd 'a' heard something then! You 'd 'a' seen what the Author thinks o' me! But come now, do you consider yourself a virtuous cha-ra'ter clean through?'

'God forbid!' said Captain Smollett solemnly. 'I am a man that tries to do his duty, and makes a mess of it as often as not. I 'm not a very popular man at home, Silver, I 'm afraid!' and the Captain sighed.

'Ah,' says Silver. 'Then how about this sequel of yours? Are you to be Cap'n Smollett just the same as ever, and not very popular at home, says you? And if so, why, it 's *Treasure Island* over again, by thunder; and I 'll be Long John, and Pew 'll be Pew, and we 'll have another mutiny, as like as not. Or are you to be somebody else? And if so, why, what the better are you? and what the worse am I?'

'Why, look here, my man,' returned the Captain, 'I can't understand how this story comes about at all, can I? I can't see how you and I, who don't exist, should get to speaking here, and smoke our pipes for all the world like reality? Very well,

then, who am I, to pipe up with my opinions? I know the Author 's on the side of good; he tells me so, it runs out of his pen as he writes. Well, that 's all I need to know; I 'll take my chance upon the rest.'

'It 's a fact he seemed to be against George Merry,' Silver admitted, musingly. 'But George is little more 'n a name at the best of it,' he added, brightening. 'And to get into soundings for once. What is this good? I made a mutiny, and I been a gentleman o' fortune; well, but by all stories, you ain't no such saint. I 'm a man that keeps company very easy; even by your own account, you ain't, and to my certain knowledge you 're a devil to haze. Which is which? Which is good, and which bad? Ah, you tell me that! Here we are in stays, and you may lay to it!'

'We 're none of us perfect,' replied the Captain. 'That 's a fact of religion, my man. All I can say is, I try to do my duty; and if you try to do yours, I can't compliment you on your success.'

'And so you was the judge, was you?' said Silver derisively.

'I would be both judge and hangman for you, my man, and never turn a hair,' returned the Captain. 'But I get beyond that: it mayn't be sound theology, but it 's common sense, that what is good is useful too—or there and thereabout, for I don't set up to be a thinker. Now, where would a story go to if there were no virtuous characters?'

'If you go to that,' replied Silver, 'where would a story begin, if there wasn't no villains?'

'Well, that's pretty much my thought,' said Captain Smollett. 'The Author has to get a story; that's what he wants; and to get a story, and to have a man like the doctor (say) given a proper chance, he has to put in men like you and Hands. But he's on the right side; and you mind your eye! You're not through this story yet; there's trouble coming for you.'

'What'll you bet?' asked John.

'Much I care if there ain't,' returned the Captain. 'I'm glad enough to be Alexander Smollett, bad as he is; and I thank my stars upon my knees that I'm not Silver. But there's the ink-bottle opening. To quarters!'

And indeed the Author was just then beginning to write the words:

Chapter XXXIII.

II

THE SINKING SHIP

'Sir,' said the first lieutenant, bursting into the Captain's cabin, 'the ship is going down.'

'Very well, Mr. Spoker,' said the Captain; 'but that is no reason for going about half-shaved. Exercise your mind a moment, Mr. Spoker, and you will see that to the philosophic eye there is nothing new in our position: the ship (if she is to go down at all) may be said to have been going down since she was launched.'

'She is settling fast,' said the first lieutenant, as he returned from shaving.

'Fast, Mr. Spoker?' asked the Captain. 'The expression is a strange one, for time (if you will think of it) is only relative.'

'Sir,' said the lieutenant, 'I think it is scarcely worth while to embark in such a discussion when we shall all be in Davy Jones's Locker in ten minutes.'

'By parity of reasoning,' returned the Captain gently, 'it would never be worth while to begin any inquiry of importance; the odds are always overwhelming that we must die before we shall have brought it to an end. You have not considered, Mr. Spoker, the situation of man,' said the Captain, smiling, and shaking his head.

'I am much more engaged in considering the position of the ship,' said Mr. Spoker.

'Spoken like a good officer,' replied the Captain, laying his hand on the lieutenant's shoulder.

On deck they found the men had broken into the spirit-room, and were fast getting drunk.

'My men,' said the Captain, 'there is no sense in this. The ship is going down, you will tell me, in ten minutes: well, and what then? To the philosophic eye, there is nothing new in our position. All our lives long, we may have been about to break a blood-vessel or to be struck by lightning, not merely in ten minutes, but in ten seconds; and that has not prevented us from eating dinner, no, nor from putting money in the Savings Bank.

I assure you, with my hand on my heart, I fail to comprehend your attitude.'

The men were already too far gone to pay much heed.

'This is a very painful sight, Mr. Spoker,' said the Captain.

'And yet to the philosophic eye, or whatever it is,' replied the first lieutenant, 'they may be said to have been getting drunk since they came aboard.'

'I do not know if you always follow my thought, Mr. Spoker,' returned the Captain gently. 'But let us proceed.'

In the powder magazine they found an old salt smoking his pipe.

'Good God!' cried the Captain, 'what are you about?'

'Well, sir,' said the old salt apologetically, 'they told me as she were going down.'

'And suppose she were?' said the Captain. 'To the philosophic eye, there would be nothing new in our position. Life, my old shipmate, life, at any moment and in any view, is as dangerous as a sinking ship; and yet it is man's handsome fashion to carry umbrellas, to wear indiarubber overshoes, to begin vast works, and to conduct himself in every way as if he might hope to be eternal. And for my own poor part I should despise the man who, even on board a sinking ship, should omit to take a pill or to wind up his watch. That, my friend, would not be the human attitude.'

'I beg pardon, sir,' said Mr. Spoker. 'But what

is precisely the difference between shaving in a sinking ship and smoking in a powder magazine?'

'Or doing anything at all in any conceivable circumstances?' cried the Captain. 'Perfectly conclusive; give me a cigar!'

Two minutes afterwards the ship blew up with a glorious detonation.

III

THE TWO MATCHES

One day there was a traveller in the woods in California, in the dry season, when the Trades were blowing strong. He had ridden a long way, and he was tired and hungry, and dismounted from his horse to smoke a pipe. But when he felt in his pocket he found but two matches. He struck the first, and it would not light.

'Here is a pretty state of things!' said the traveller. 'Dying for a smoke; only one match left; and that certain to miss fire! Was there ever a creature so unfortunate? And yet,' thought the traveller, 'suppose I light this match, and smoke my pipe, and shake out the dottle here in the grass —the grass might catch fire, for it is dry like tinder; and while I snatch out the flames in front, they might evade and run behind me, and seize upon yon bush of poison oak; before I could reach it that would have blazed up; over the bush I see a pine-tree hung with moss; that, too, would fly in

fire upon the instant to its topmost bough; and the flame of that long torch—how would the trade-wind take and brandish that through the inflammable forest! I hear this dell roar in a moment with the joint voice of wind and fire, I see myself gallop for my soul, and the flying conflagration chase and outflank me through the hills; I see this pleasant forest burn for days, and the cattle roasted, and the springs dried up, and the farmer ruined, and his children cast upon the world. What a world hangs upon this moment!'

With that he struck the match, and it missed fire.

'Thank God!' said the traveller, and put his pipe in his pocket.

IV

THE SICK MAN AND THE FIREMAN

THERE was once a sick man in a burning house, to whom there entered a fireman.

'Do not save me,' said the sick man. 'Save those who are strong.'

'Will you kindly tell me why?' inquired the fireman, for he was a civil fellow.

'Nothing could possibly be fairer,' said the sick man. 'The strong should be preferred in all cases, because they are of more service in the world.'

The fireman pondered a while, for he was a man of some philosophy. 'Granted,' said he at last, as a part of the roof fell in; 'but for the sake of conver-

sation, what would you lay down as the proper service of the strong?'

'Nothing can possibly be easier,' returned the sick man; 'the proper service of the strong is to help the weak.'

Again the fireman reflected, for there was nothing hasty about this excellent creature. 'I could forgive you being sick,' he said at last, as a portion of the wall fell out, 'but I cannot bear your being such a fool.' And with that he heaved up his fireman's axe, for he was eminently just, and clove the sick man to the bed.

V

THE DEVIL AND THE INNKEEPER

Once upon a time the devil stayed at an inn, where no one knew him, for they were people whose education had been neglected. He was bent on mischief, and for a time kept everybody by the ears. But at last the innkeeper set a watch upon the devil and took him in the fact.

The innkeeper got a rope's end.

'Now I am going to thrash you,' said the innkeeper.

'You have no right to be angry with me,' said the devil. 'I am only the devil, and it is my nature to do wrong.'

'Is that so?' asked the innkeeper.

'Fact, I assure you,' said the devil.

'You really cannot help doing ill?' asked the innkeeper.

'Not in the smallest,' said the devil; 'it would be useless cruelty to thrash a thing like me.'

'It would indeed,' said the innkeeper.

And he made a noose and hanged the devil.

'There!' said the innkeeper.

VI

THE PENITENT

A MAN met a lad weeping. 'What do you weep for?' he asked.

'I am weeping for my sins,' said the lad.

'You must have little to do,' said the man.

The next day they met again. Once more the lad was weeping. 'Why do you weep now?' asked the man.

'I am weeping because I have nothing to eat,' said the lad.

'I thought it would come to that,' said the man.

VII

THE YELLOW PAINT

IN a certain city there lived a physician who sold yellow paint. This was of so singular a virtue that whoso was bedaubed with it from head to heel was set free from the dangers of life, and the bondage of

sin, and the fear of death for ever. So the physician said in his prospectus; and so said all the citizens in the city; and there was nothing more urgent in men's hearts than to be properly painted themselves, and nothing they took more delight in than to see others painted. There was in the same city a young man of a very good family but of a somewhat reckless life, who had reached the age of manhood, and would have nothing to say to the paint: 'To-morrow was soon enough,' said he; and when the morrow came he would still put it off. So he might have continued to do until his death; only, he had a friend of about his own age and much of his own manners; and this youth, taking a walk in the public street, with not one fleck of paint upon his body, was suddenly run down by a water-cart and cut off in the heyday of his nakedness. This shook the other to the soul; so that I never beheld a man more earnest to be painted; and on the very same evening, in the presence of all his family, to appropriate music, and himself weeping aloud, he received three complete coats and a touch of varnish on the top. The physician (who was himself affected even to tears) protested he had never done a job so thorough.

Some two months afterwards, the young man was carried on a stretcher to the physician's house.

'What is the meaning of this?' he cried, as soon as the door was opened. 'I was to be set free from all the dangers of life; and here have I been run down by that selfsame water-cart, and my leg is broken.'

'Dear me!' said the physician. 'This is very sad. But I perceive I must explain to you the action of my paint. A broken bone is a mighty small affair at the worst of it; and it belongs to a class of accident to which my paint is quite inapplicable. Sin, my dear young friend, sin is the sole calamity that a wise man should apprehend; it is against sin that I have fitted you out; and when you come to be tempted you will give me news of my paint.'

'O!' said the young man, 'I did not understand that, and it seems rather disappointing. But I have no doubt all is for the best; and in the meanwhile, I shall be obliged to you if you will set my leg.'

'That is none of my business,' said the physician; 'but if your bearers will carry you round the corner to the surgeon's, I feel sure he will afford relief.'

Some three years later, the young man came running to the physician's house in a great perturbation. 'What is the meaning of this?' he cried. 'Here was I to be set free from the bondage of sin; and I have just committed forgery, arson, and murder.'

'Dear me,' said the physician. 'This is very serious. Off with your clothes at once.' And as soon as the young man had stripped he examined him from head to foot. 'No,' he cried with great relief, 'there is not a flake broken. Cheer up, my young friend, your paint is as good as new.'

'Good God!' cried the young man, 'and what then can be the use of it?'

'Why,' said the physician, 'I perceive I must

explain to you the nature of the action of my paint. It does not exactly prevent sin; it extenuates instead the painful consequences. It is not so much for this world as for the next; it is not against life; in short, it is against death that I have fitted you out. And when you come to die, you will give me news of my paint.'

'O!' cried the young man, 'I had not understood that, and it seems a little disappointing. But there is no doubt all is for the best; and in the meanwhile, I shall be obliged if you will help me to undo the evil I have brought on innocent persons.'

'That is none of my business,' said the physician; 'but if you will go round the corner to the police office, I feel sure it will afford you relief to give yourself up.'

Six weeks later, the physician was called to the town jail.

'What is the meaning of this?' cried the young man. 'Here am I literally crusted with your paint; and I have broken my leg, and committed all the crimes in the calendar, and must be hanged to-morrow; and am in the meanwhile in a fear so extreme that I lack words to picture it.'

'Dear me,' said the physician. 'This is really amazing. Well, well; perhaps, if you had not been painted, you would have been more frightened still.'

VIII

THE HOUSE OF ELD

So soon as the child began to speak, the gyve was riveted; and the boys and girls limped about their play like convicts. Doubtless it was more pitiable to see and more painful to bear in youth; but even the grown folk, besides being very unhandy on their feet, were often sick with ulcers.

About the time when Jack was ten years old, many strangers began to journey through that country. These he beheld going lightly by on the long roads, and the thing amazed him. 'I wonder how it comes,' he asked, 'that all these strangers are so quick afoot, and we must drag about our fetter?'

'My dear boy,' said his uncle, the catechist, 'do not complain about your fetter, for it is the only thing that makes life worth living. None are happy, none are good, none are respectable, that are not gyved like us. And I must tell you, besides, it is very dangerous talk. If you grumble of your iron, you will have no luck; if ever you take it off, you will be instantly smitten by a thunderbolt.'

'Are there no thunderbolts for these strangers?' asked Jack.

'Jupiter is long-suffering to the benighted,' returned the catechist.

'Upon my word, I could wish I had been less fortunate,' said Jack. 'For if I had been born

benighted, I might now be going free; and it cannot be denied the iron is inconvenient, and the ulcer hurts.'

'Ah!' cried his uncle, 'do not envy the heathen! Theirs is a sad lot! Ah, poor souls, if they but knew the joys of being fettered! Poor souls, my heart yearns for them. But the truth is, they are vile, odious, insolent, ill-conditioned, stinking brutes, not truly human — for what is a man without a fetter?—and you cannot be too particular not to touch or speak with them.'

After this talk, the child would never pass one of the unfettered on the road but what he spat at him and called him names, which was the practice of the children in that part.

It chanced one day, when he was fifteen, he went into the woods, and the ulcer pained him. It was a fair day with a blue sky; all the birds were singing; but Jack nursed his foot. Presently, another song began; it sounded like the singing of a person, only far more gay; at the same time there was a beating on the earth. Jack put aside the leaves; and there was a lad of his own village, leaping, and dancing and singing to himself in a green dell; and on the grass beside him lay the dancer's iron.

'O!' cried Jack, 'you have your fetter off!'

'For God's sake, don't tell your uncle!' cried the lad.

'If you fear my uncle,' returned Jack, 'why do you not fear the thunderbolt?'

'That is only an old wives' tale,' said the other.

'It is only told to children. Scores of us come here among the woods and dance for nights together, and are none the worse.'

This put Jack in a thousand new thoughts. He was a grave lad; he had no mind to dance himself; he wore his fetter manfully, and tended his ulcer without complaint. But he loved the less to be deceived or to see others cheated. He began to lie in wait for heathen travellers, at covert parts of the road, and in the dusk of the day, so that he might speak with them unseen; and these were greatly taken with their wayside questioner, and told him things of weight. The wearing of gyves (they said) was no command of Jupiter's. It was the contrivance of a white-faced thing, a sorcerer, that dwelt in that country in the Wood of Eld. He was one like Glaucus that could change his shape, yet he could be always told; for when he was crossed, he gobbled like a turkey. He had three lives; but the third smiting would make an end of him indeed; and with that his house of sorcery would vanish, the gyves fall, and the villagers take hands and dance like children.

'And in your country?' Jack would ask.

But at this the travellers, with one accord, would put him off; until Jack began to suppose there was no land entirely happy. Or, if there were, it must be one that kept its folk at home; which was natural enough.

But the case of the gyves weighed upon him. The sight of the children limping stuck in his eyes;

the groans of such as dressed their ulcers haunted him. And it came at last in his mind that he was born to free them.

There was in that village a sword of heavenly forgery, beaten upon Vulcan's anvil. It was never used but in the temple, and then the flat of it only; and it hung on a nail by the catechist's chimney. Early one night, Jack rose, and took the sword, and was gone out of the house and the village in the darkness.

All night he walked at a venture; and when day came he met strangers going to the fields. Then he asked after the Wood of Eld and the house of sorcery; and one said north, and one south; until Jack saw that they deceived him. So then, when he asked his way of any man, he showed the bright sword naked; and at that the gyve on the man's ankle rang, and answered in his stead; and the word was still *Straight on.* But the man, when his gyve spoke, spat and struck at Jack, and threw stones at him as he went away; so that his head was broken.

So he came to that wood, and entered in, and he was aware of a house in a low place, where funguses grew, and the trees met, and the steaming of the marsh arose about it like a smoke. It was a fine house, and a very rambling; some parts of it were ancient like the hills, and some but of yesterday, and none finished; and all the ends of it were open, so that you could go in from every side. Yet it was in good repair, and all the chimneys smoked.

Jack went in through the gable; and there was

one room after another, all bare, but all furnished in part, so that a man could dwell there; and in each there was a fire burning, where a man could warm himself, and a table spread where he might eat. But Jack saw nowhere any living creature; only the bodies of some stuffed.

'This is a hospitable house,' said Jack; 'but the ground must be quaggy underneath, for at every step the building quakes.'

He had gone some time in the house, when he began to be hungry. Then he looked at the food, and at first he was afraid; but he bared the sword, and by the shining of the sword, it seemed the food was honest. So he took the courage to sit down and eat, and he was refreshed in mind and body.

'This is strange,' thought he, 'that in the house of sorcery there should be food so wholesome.'

As he was yet eating, there came into that room the appearance of his uncle, and Jack was afraid because he had taken the sword. But his uncle was never more kind, and sat down to meat with him, and praised him because he had taken the sword. Never had these two been more pleasantly together, and Jack was full of love to the man.

'It was very well done,' said his uncle, 'to take the sword and come yourself into the House of Eld; a good thought and a brave deed. But now you are satisfied; and we may go home to dinner arm in arm.'

'O dear no!' said Jack. 'I am not satisfied yet.'

'How!' cried his uncle. 'Are you not warmed by the fire? Does not this food sustain you?'

'I see the food to be wholesome,' said Jack; 'and still it is no proof that a man should wear a gyve on his right leg.'

Now at this the appearance of his uncle gobbled like a turkey.

'Jupiter!' cried Jack, 'is this the sorcerer?'

His hand held back and his heart failed him for the love he bore his uncle; but he heaved up the sword and smote the appearance on the head; and it cried out aloud with the voice of his uncle; and fell to the ground; and a little bloodless white thing fled from the room.

The cry rang in Jack's ears, and his knees smote together, and conscience cried upon him; and yet he was strengthened, and there woke in his bones the lust of that enchanter's blood. 'If the gyves are to fall,' said he, 'I must go through with this, and when I get home I shall find my uncle dancing.'

So he went on after the bloodless thing. In the way he met the appearance of his father; and his father was incensed, and railed upon him, and called to him upon his duty, and bade him be home, while there was yet time. 'For you can still,' said he, 'be home by sunset; and then all will be forgiven.'

'God knows,' said Jack, 'I fear your anger; but

yet your anger does not prove that a man should wear a gyve on his right leg.'

And at that the appearance of his father gobbled like a turkey.

'Ah, heaven,' cried Jack, 'the sorcerer again!'

The blood ran backward in his body and his joints rebelled against him for the love he bore his father; but he heaved up the sword, and plunged it in the heart of the appearance; and the appearance cried out aloud with the voice of his father; and fell to the ground; and a little bloodless white thing fled from the room.

The cry rang in Jack's ears, and his soul was darkened; but now rage came to him. 'I have done what I dare not think upon,' said he. 'I will go to an end with it, or perish. And when I get home, I pray God this may be a dream, and I may find my father dancing.'

So he went on after the bloodless thing that had escaped; and in the way he met the appearance of his mother, and she wept. 'What have you done?' she cried. 'What is this that you have done? O come home (where you may be by bedtime) ere you do more ill to me and mine; for it is enough to smite my brother and your father.'

'Dear mother, it is not these that I have smitten,' said Jack; 'it was but the enchanter in their shape. And even if I had, it would not prove that a man should wear a gyve on his right leg.'

And at this the appearance gobbled like a turkey.

He never knew how he did that; but he swung the sword on the one side, and clove the appearance through the midst; and it cried out aloud with the voice of his mother; and fell to the ground; and with the fall of it the house was gone from over Jack's head, and he stood alone in the woods, and the gyve was loosened from his leg.

'Well,' said he, 'the enchanter is now dead, and the fetter gone.' But the cries rang in his soul, and the day was like night to him. 'This has been a sore business,' said he. 'Let me get forth out of the wood, and see the good that I have done to others.'

He thought to leave the fetter where it lay, but when he turned to go, his mind was otherwise. So he stooped and put the gyve in his bosom; and the rough iron galled him as he went, and his bosom bled.

Now when he was forth of the wood upon the highway, he met folk returning from the field; and those he met had no fetter on the right leg, but, behold! they had one upon the left. Jack asked them what it signified; and they said, 'that was the new wear, for the old was found to be a superstition.' Then he looked at them nearly; and there was a new ulcer on the left ankle, and the old one on the right was not yet healed.

'Now, may God forgive me!' cried Jack. 'I would I were well home.'

And when he was home, there lay his uncle smitten on the head, and his father pierced through

the heart, and his mother cloven through the midst. And he sat in the lone house and wept beside the bodies.

MORAL

Old is the tree and the fruit good,
Very old and thick the wood.
Woodman, is your courage stout?
Beware! the root is wrapped about
Your mother's heart, your father's bones;
And like the mandrake comes with groans.

IX

THE FOUR REFORMERS

Four reformers met under a bramble-bush. They were all agreed the world must be changed. 'We must abolish property,' said one.

'We must abolish marriage,' said the second.

'We must abolish God,' said the third.

'I wish we could abolish work,' said the fourth.

'Do not let us get beyond practical politics,' said the first. 'The first thing is to reduce men to a common level.'

'The first thing,' said the second, 'is to give freedom to the sexes.'

'The first thing,' said the third, 'is to find out how to do it.'

'The first step,' said the first, 'is to abolish the Bible.'

'The first thing,' said the second, 'is to abolish the laws.'

'The first thing,' said the third, 'is to abolish mankind.'

X

THE MAN AND HIS FRIEND

A MAN quarrelled with his friend.

'I have been much deceived in you,' said the man.

And the friend made a face at him and went away.

A little after, they both died, and came together before the great white Justice of the Peace. It began to look black for the friend, but the man for a while had a clear character and was getting in good spirits.

'I find here some record of a quarrel,' said the Justice, looking in his notes. 'Which of you was in the wrong?'

'He was,' said the man. 'He spoke ill of me behind my back.'

'Did he so?' said the Justice. 'And pray how did he speak about your neighbours?'

'O, he had always a nasty tongue,' said the man.

'And you chose him for your friend?' cried the Justice. 'My good fellow, we have no use here for fools.'

So the man was cast in the pit, and the friend laughed out aloud in the dark and remained to be tried on other charges.

XI

THE READER

'I NEVER read such an impious book,' said the reader, throwing it on the floor.

'You need not hurt me,' said the book; 'you will only get less for me second-hand, and I did not write myself.'

'That is true,' said the reader. 'My quarrel is with your author.'

'Ah, well,' said the book, 'you need not buy his rant.'

'That is true,' said the reader. 'But I thought him such a cheerful writer.'

'I find him so,' said the book.

'You must be differently made from me,' said the reader.

'Let me tell you a fable,' said the book. 'There were two men wrecked upon a desert island; one of them made believe he was at home, the other admitted——'

'O, I know your kind of fable,' said the reader. 'They both died.'

'And so they did,' said the book. 'No doubt of that. And everybody else.'

'That is true,' said the reader. 'Push it a little further for this once. And when they were all dead?'

'They were in God's hands, the same as before,' said the book.

'Not much to boast of, by your account,' cried the reader.

'Who is impious now?' said the book. And the reader put him on the fire.

The coward crouches from the rod,
And loathes the iron face of God.

XII

THE CITIZEN AND THE TRAVELLER

'Look round you,' said the citizen. 'This is the largest market in the world.'

'O, surely not,' said the traveller.

'Well, perhaps not the largest,' said the citizen, 'but much the best.'

'You are certainly wrong there,' said the traveller. 'I can tell you . . .'

They buried the stranger at the dusk.

XIII

THE DISTINGUISHED STRANGER

Once upon a time there came to this earth a visitor from a neighbouring planet. And he was met at

the place of his descent by a great philosopher, who was to show him everything.

First of all they came through a wood, and the stranger looked upon the trees. 'Whom have we here?' said he.

'These are only vegetables,' said the philosopher. 'They are alive, but not at all interesting.'

'I don't know about that,' said the stranger. 'They seem to have very good manners. Do they never speak?'

'They lack the gift,' said the philosopher.

'Yet I think I hear them sing,' said the other.

'That is only the wind among the leaves,' said the philosopher. 'I will explain to you the theory of winds: it is very interesting.'

'Well,' said the stranger, 'I wish I knew what they are thinking.'

'They cannot think,' said the philosopher.

'I don't know about that,' returned the stranger: and then, laying his hand upon a trunk: 'I like these people,' said he.

'They are not people at all,' said the philosopher. 'Come along.'

Next they came through a meadow where there were cows.

'These are very dirty people,' said the stranger.

'They are not people at all,' said the philosopher; and he explained what a cow is, in scientific words which I have forgotten.

'That is all one to me,' said the stranger. 'But why do they never look up?'

'Because they are graminivorous,' said the philosopher; 'and to live upon grass, which is not highly nutritious, requires so close an attention to business that they have no time to think, or speak, or look at the scenery, or keep themselves clean.'

'Well,' said the stranger, 'that is one way to live, no doubt. But I prefer the people with the green heads.'

Next they came into a city, and the streets were full of men and women.

'These are very odd people,' said the stranger.

'They are the people of the greatest nation in the world,' said the philosopher.

'Are they indeed?' said the stranger. 'They scarcely look so.'

XIV

THE CART-HORSES AND THE SADDLE-HORSE

Two cart-horses, a gelding and a mare, were brought to Samoa, and put in the same field with a saddle-horse to run free on the island. They were rather afraid to go near him, for they saw he was a saddle-horse, and supposed he would not speak to them. Now the saddle-horse had never seen creatures so big. 'These must be great chiefs,' thought he, and he approached them civilly. 'Lady and gentleman,' said he, 'I understand you are from the colonies. I

offer you my affectionate compliments, and make you heartily welcome to the islands.'

The colonials looked at him askance, and consulted with each other.

'Who can he be?' said the gelding.

'He seems suspiciously civil,' said the mare.

'I do not think he can be much account,' said the gelding.

'Depend upon it, he is only a Kanaka,' said the mare.

Then they turned to him.

'Go to the devil!' said the gelding.

'I wonder at your impudence, speaking to persons of our quality!' cried the mare.

The saddle-horse went away by himself. 'I was right,' said he, 'they are great chiefs.'

XV

THE TADPOLE AND THE FROG

'BE ashamed of yourself,' said the frog. 'When I was a tadpole, I had no tail.'

'Just what I thought!' said the tadpole. 'You never were a tadpole.'

XVI

SOMETHING IN IT

THE natives told him many tales. In particular, they warned him of the house of yellow reeds tied

with black sinnet, how any one who touched it became instantly the prey of Akaänga, and was handed on to him by Miru the ruddy, and hocussed with the kava of the dead, and baked in the ovens and eaten by the eaters of the dead.

'There is nothing in it,' said the missionary.

There was a bay upon that island, a very fair bay to look upon; but, by the native saying, it was death to bathe there. 'There is nothing in that,' said the missionary; and he came to the bay, and went swimming. Presently an eddy took him and bore him towards the reef. 'Oho!' thought the missionary, 'it seems there is something in it after all.' And he swam the harder, but the eddy carried him away. 'I do not care about this eddy,' said the missionary; and even as he said it, he was aware of a house raised on piles above the sea; it was built of yellow reeds, one reed joined with another, and the whole bound with black sinnet; a ladder led to the door, and all about the house hung calabashes. He had never seen such a house, nor yet such calabashes; and the eddy set for the ladder. 'This is singular,' said the missionary, 'but there can be nothing in it.' And he laid hold of the ladder and went up. It was a fine house; but there was no man there; and when the missionary looked back he saw no island, only the heaving of the sea. 'It is strange about the island,' said the missionary, 'but who's afraid? my stories are the true ones.' And he laid hold of a calabash, for he was one that loved curiosities. Now he had no sooner laid hand upon the calabash than

that which he handled, and that which he saw and stood on, burst like a bubble and was gone; and night closed upon him, and the waters, and the meshes of the net; and he wallowed there like a fish.

'A body would think there was something in this,' said the missionary. 'But if these tales are true, I wonder what about my tales!'

Now the flaming of Akaänga's torch drew near in the night; and the misshapen hands groped in the meshes of the net; and they took the missionary between the finger and the thumb, and bore him dripping in the night and silence to the place of the ovens of Miru. And there was Miru, ruddy in the glow of the ovens; and there sat her four daughters, and made the kava of the dead; and there sat the comers out of the islands of the living, dripping and lamenting.

This was a dread place to reach for any of the sons of men. But of all who ever came there, the missionary was the most concerned; and, to make things worse, the person next him was a convert of his own.

'Aha,' said the convert, 'so you are here like your neighbours? And how about all your stories?'

'It seems,' said the missionary, with bursting tears, 'that there was nothing in them.'

By this the kava of the dead was ready, and the daughters of Miru began to intone in the old manner of singing: 'Gone are the green islands and the bright sea, the sun and the moon and the forty million stars, and life and love and hope. Hence-

forth is no more, only to sit in the night and silence, and see your friends devoured; for life is a deceit, and the bandage is taken from your eyes.'

Now when the singing was done, one of the daughters came with the bowl. Desire of that kava rose in the missionary's bosom; he lusted for it like a swimmer for the land, or a bridegroom for his bride; and he reached out his hand, and took the bowl, and would have drunk. And then he remembered, and put it back.

'Drink!' sang the daughter of Miru. 'There is no kava like the kava of the dead, and to drink of it once is the reward of living.'

'I thank you. It smells excellent,' said the missionary. 'But I am a blue-ribbon man myself; and though I am aware there is a difference of opinion even in our own confession, I have always held kava to be excluded.'

'What!' cried the convert. 'Are you going to respect a taboo at a time like this? And you were always so opposed to taboos when you were alive!'

'To other people's,' said the missionary. 'Never to my own.'

'But yours have all proved wrong,' said the convert.

'It looks like it,' said the missionary, 'and I can't help that. No reason why I should break my word.'

'I never heard the like of this!' cried the daughter of Miru. 'Pray, what do you expect to gain?'

'That is not the point,' said the missionary. 'I

took this pledge for others, I am not going to break it for myself.'

The daughter of Miru was puzzled; she came and told her mother, and Miru was vexed; and they went and told Akaänga.

'I don't know what to do about this,' said Akaänga; and he came and reasoned with the missionary.

'But there *is* such a thing as right and wrong,' said the missionary; 'and your ovens cannot alter that.'

'Give the kava to the rest,' said Akaänga to the daughters of Miru. 'I must get rid of this sea-lawyer instantly, or worse will come of it.'

The next moment the missionary came up in the midst of the sea, and there before him were the palm-trees of the island. He swam to the shore gladly, and landed. Much matter of thought was in that missionary's mind.

'I seem to have been misinformed upon some points,' said he. 'Perhaps there is not much in it, as I supposed; but there is something in it after all. Let me be glad of that.'

And he rang the bell for service.

MORAL.

The sticks break, the stones crumble,
The eternal altars tilt and tumble,
Sanctions and tales dislimn like mist
About the amazed evangelist.
He stands unshook from age to youth
Upon one pin-point of the truth.

XVII

FAITH, HALF-FAITH, AND NO FAITH AT ALL.

In the ancient days there went three men upon pilgrimage; one was a priest, and one was a virtuous person, and the third was an old rover with his axe.

As they went, the priest spoke about the grounds of faith.

'We find the proofs of our religion in the works of nature,' said he, and beat his breast.

'That is true,' said the virtuous person.

'The peacock has a scrannel voice,' said the priest, 'as has been laid down always in our books. How cheering!' he cried, in a voice like one that wept. 'How comforting!'

'I require no such proofs,' said the virtuous person.

'Then you have no reasonable faith,' said the priest.

'Great is the right, and shall prevail!' cried the virtuous person. 'There is loyalty in my soul; be sure, there is loyalty in the mind of Odin.'

'These are but playings upon words,' returned the priest. 'A sackful of such trash is nothing to the peacock.'

Just then they passed a country farm, where there was a peacock seated on a rail; and the bird opened its mouth and sang with the voice of a nightingale.

'Where are you now?' asked the virtuous person. 'And yet this shakes not me! Great is the truth, and shall prevail!'

'The devil fly away with that peacock!' said the priest; and he was downcast for a mile or two.

But presently they came to a shrine, where a Fakeer performed miracles.

'Ah!' said the priest, 'here are the true grounds of faith. The peacock was but an adminicle. This is the base of our religion.' And he beat upon his breast, and groaned like one with colic.

'Now to me,' said the virtuous person, 'all this is as little to the purpose as the peacock. I believe because I see the right is great and must prevail; and this Fakeer might carry on with his conjuring tricks till doomsday, and it would not play bluff upon a man like me.'

Now at this the Fakeer was so much incensed that his hand trembled; and, lo! in the midst of a miracle the cards fell from up his sleeve.

'Where are you now?' asked the virtuous person. 'And yet it shakes not me!'

'The devil fly away with the Fakeer!' cried the priest. 'I really do not see the good of going on with this pilgrimage.'

'Cheer up!' cried the virtuous person. 'Great is the right, and shall prevail!'

'If you are quite sure it will prevail,' says the priest.

'I pledge my word for that,' said the virtuous person.

So the other began to go on again with a better heart.

At last one came running, and told them all was lost: that the powers of darkness had besieged the Heavenly Mansions, that Odin was to die, and evil triumph.

'I have been grossly deceived,' cried the virtuous person.

'All is lost now,' said the priest.

'I wonder if it is too late to make it up with the devil?' said the virtuous person.

'O, I hope not,' said the priest. 'And at any rate we can but try.—But what are you doing with your axe?' says he to the rover.

'I am off to die with Odin,' said the rover.

XVIII

THE TOUCHSTONE

The King was a man that stood well before the world; his smile was sweet as clover, but his soul withinsides was as little as a pea. He had two sons; and the younger son was a boy after his heart, but the elder was one whom he feared. It befell one morning that the drum sounded in the dun before it was yet day; and the King rode with his two sons, and a brave array behind them. They rode two hours, and came to the foot of a brown mountain that was very steep.

'Where do we ride?' said the elder son.

'Across this brown mountain,' said the King, and smiled to himself.

'My father knows what he is doing,' said the younger son.

And they rode two hours more, and came to the sides of a black river that was wondrous deep.

'And where do we ride?' asked the elder son.

'Over this black river,' said the King, and smiled to himself.

'My father knows what he is doing,' said the younger son.

And they rode all that day, and about the time of the sunsetting came to the side of a lake, where was a great dun.

'It is here we ride,' said the King; 'to a King's house, and a priest's, and a house where you will learn much.'

At the gates of the dun, the King who was a priest met them; and he was a grave man, and beside him stood his daughter, and she was as fair as the morn, and one that smiled and looked down.

'These are my two sons,' said the first King.

'And here is my daughter,' said the King who was a priest.

'She is a wonderful fine maid,' said the first King, 'and I like her manner of smiling.'

'They are wonderful well-grown lads,' said the second, 'and I like their gravity.'

And then the two Kings looked at each other, and said, 'The thing may come about.'

And in the meanwhile the two lads looked upon

the maid, and the one grew pale and the other red; and the maid looked upon the ground smiling.

'Here is the maid that I shall marry,' said the elder. 'For I think she smiled upon me.'

But the younger plucked his father by the sleeve. 'Father,' said he, 'a word in your ear. If I find favour in your sight, might not I wed this maid, for I think she smiles upon me?'

'A word in yours,' said the King his father. 'Waiting is good hunting, and when the teeth are shut the tongue is at home.'

Now they were come into the dun, and feasted; and this was a great house, so that the lads were astonished; and the King that was a priest sat at the end of the board and was silent, so that the lads were filled with reverence; and the maid served them smiling with downcast eyes, so that their hearts were enlarged.

Before it was day, the elder son arose, and he found the maid at her weaving, for she was a diligent girl. 'Maid,' quoth he, 'I would fain marry you.'

'You must speak with my father,' said she, and she looked upon the ground smiling, and became like the rose.

'Her heart is with me,' said the elder son, and he went down to the lake and sang.

A little while after came the younger son. 'Maid,' quoth he, 'if our fathers were agreed, I would like well to marry you.'

'You can speak to my father,' said she; and looked upon the ground, and smiled and grew like the rose.

'She is a dutiful daughter,' said the younger son, 'she will make an obedient wife.' And then he thought, 'What shall I do?' and he remembered the King her father was a priest; so he went into the temple, and sacrificed a weasel and a hare.

Presently the news got about; and the two lads and the first King were called into the presence of the King who was a priest, where he sat upon the high seat.

'Little I reck of gear,' said the King who was a priest, 'and little of power. For we live here among the shadow of things, and the heart is sick of seeing them. And we stay here in the wind like raiment drying, and the heart is weary of the wind. But one thing I love, and that is truth; and for one thing will I give my daughter, and that is the trial stone. For in the light of that stone the seeming goes, and the being shows, and all things besides are worthless. Therefore, lads, if ye would wed my daughter, out foot, and bring me the stone of touch, for that is the price of her.'

'A word in your ear,' said the younger son to his father. 'I think we do very well without this stone.'

'A word in yours,' said the father. 'I am of your way of thinking; but when the teeth are shut the tongue is at home.' And he smiled to the King that was a priest.

But the elder son got to his feet, and called the King that was a priest by the name of father. 'For whether I marry the maid or no, I will call you by that word for the love of your wisdom; and even

now I will ride forth and search the world for the stone of touch.' So he said farewell, and rode into the world.

'I think I will go too,' said the younger son, 'if I can have your leave. For my heart goes out to the maid.'

'You will ride home with me,' said his father.

So they rode home, and when they came to the dun, the King had his son into his treasury. 'Here,' said he, 'is the touchstone which shows truth; for there is no truth but plain truth; and if you will look in this, you will see yourself as you are.'

And the younger son looked in it, and saw his face as it were the face of a beardless youth, and he was well enough pleased; for the thing was a piece of a mirror.

'Here is no such great thing to make a work about,' said he; 'but if it will get me the maid I shall never complain. But what a fool is my brother to ride into the world, and the thing all the while at home!'

So they rode back to the other dun, and showed the mirror to the King that was a priest; and when he had looked in it, and seen himself like a King, and his house like a King's house, and all things like themselves, he cried out and blessed God. 'For now I know,' said he, 'there is no truth but the plain truth; and I am a King indeed, although my heart misgave me.' And he pulled down his temple and built a new one; and then the younger son was married to the maid.

In the meantime the elder son rode into the world to find the touchstone of the trial of truth; and whenever he came to a place of habitation, he would ask the men if they had heard of it. And in every place the men answered: 'Not only have we heard of it, but we alone, of all men, possess the thing itself, and it hangs in the side of our chimney to this day.' Then would the elder son be glad, and beg for a sight of it. And sometimes it would be a piece of mirror, that showed the seeming of things; and then he would say, 'This can never be, for there should be more than seeming.' And sometimes it would be a lump of coal, which showed nothing; and then he would say, 'This can never be, for at least there is the seeming.' And sometimes it would be a touchstone indeed, beautiful in hue, adorned with polishing, the light inhabiting its sides; and when he found this, he would beg the thing, and the persons of that place would give it him, for all men were very generous of that gift; so that at the last he had his wallet full of them, and they chinked together when he rode; and when he halted by the side of the way he would take them out and try them, till his head turned like the sails upon a windmill.

'A murrain upon this business!' said the elder son, 'for I perceive no end to it. Here I have the red, and here the blue and the green; and to me they seem all excellent, and yet shame each other. A murrain on the trade! If it were not for the King that is a priest and whom I have called my father, and if it were not for the fair maid of the

dun that makes my mouth to sing and my heart enlarge, I would even tumble them all into the salt sea, and go home and be a King like other folk.'

But he was like the hunter that has seen a stag upon a mountain, so that the night may fall, and the fire be kindled, and the lights shine in his house; but desire of that stag is single in his bosom.

Now after many years the elder son came upon the sides of the salt sea; and it was night, and a savage place, and the clamour of the sea was loud. There he was aware of a house, and a man sat there by the light of a candle, for he had no fire. Now the elder son came in to him, and the man gave him water to drink, for he had no bread; and wagged his head when spoken to, for he had no words.

'Have you the touchstone of truth?' asked the elder son; and when the man had wagged his head, 'I might have known that,' cried the elder son. 'I have here a wallet full of them!' And with that he laughed, although his heart was weary.

And with that the man laughed too, and with the fuff of his laughter the candle went out.

'Sleep,' said the man, 'for now I think you have come far enough; and your quest is ended, and my candle is out.'

Now when the morning came, the man gave him a clear pebble in his hand, and it had no beauty and no colour; and the elder son looked upon it scornfully and shook his head; and he went away, for it seemed a small affair to him.

All that day he rode, and his mind was quiet, and the desire of the chase allayed. 'How if this poor pebble be the touchstone, after all?' said he: and he got down from his horse, and emptied forth his wallet by the side of the way. Now, in the light of each other, all the touchstones lost their hue and fire, and withered like stars at morning; but in the light of the pebble, their beauty remained, only the pebble was the most bright. And the elder son smote upon his brow. 'How if this be the truth?' he cried, 'that all are a little true?' And he took the pebble, and turned its light upon the heavens, and they deepened about him like the pit; and he turned it on the hills, and the hills were cold and rugged, but life ran in their sides so that his own life bounded; and he turned it on the dust, and he beheld the dust with joy and terror; and he turned it on himself, and knelt down and prayed.

'Now, thanks be to God,' said the elder son, 'I have found the touchstone; and now I may turn my reins, and ride home to the King and to the maid of the dun that makes my mouth to sing and my heart enlarge.'

Now when he came to the dun, he saw children playing by the gate where the King had met him in the old days; and this stayed his pleasure, for he thought in his heart, 'It is here my children should be playing.' And when he came into the hall, there was his brother on the high seat and the maid beside him; and at that his anger rose, for he

thought in his heart, 'It is I that should be sitting there, and the maid beside me.'

'Who are you?' said his brother. 'And what make you in the dun?'

'I am your elder brother,' he replied. 'And I am come to marry the maid, for I have brought the touchstone of truth.'

Then the younger brother laughed aloud. 'Why,' said he, 'I found the touchstone years ago, and married the maid, and there are our children playing at the gate.'

Now at this the elder brother grew as grey as the dawn. 'I pray you have dealt justly,' said he, 'for I perceive my life is lost.'

'Justly?' quoth the younger brother. 'It becomes you ill, that are a restless man and a runagate, to doubt my justice or the King my father's, that are sedentary folk and known in the land.'

'Nay,' said the elder brother, 'you have all else, have patience also; and suffer me to say the world is full of touchstones, and it appears not easily which is true.'

'I have no shame of mine,' said the younger brother. 'There it is, and look in it.'

So the elder brother looked in the mirror, and he was sore amazed; for he was an old man, and his hair was white upon his head; and he sat down in the hall and wept aloud.

'Now,' said the younger brother, 'see what a fool's part you have played, that ran over all the world to seek what was lying in our father's treasury,

and came back an old carle for the dogs to bark at, and without chick or child. And I that was dutiful and wise sit here crowned with virtues and pleasures, and happy in the light of my hearth.'

'Methinks you have a cruel tongue,' said the elder brother; and he pulled out the clear pebble and turned its light on his brother; and behold the man was lying, his soul was shrunk into the smallness of a pea, and his heart was a bag of little fears like scorpions, and love was dead in his bosom. And at that the elder brother cried out aloud, and turned the light of the pebble on the maid, and, lo! she was but a mask of a woman, and withinsides she was quite dead, and she smiled as a clock ticks, and knew not wherefore.

'O, well,' said the elder brother, 'I perceive there is both good and bad. So fare ye all as well as ye may in the dun; but I will go forth into the world with my pebble in my pocket.'

XIX

THE POOR THING

THERE was a man in the islands who fished for his bare bellyful, and took his life in his hands to go forth upon the sea between four planks. But though he had much ado, he was merry of heart; and the gulls heard him laugh when the spray met him. And though he had little lore he was sound of spirit; and when the fish came to his hook in the

mid-waters, he blessed God without weighing. He was bitter poor in goods and bitter ugly of countenance, and he had no wife.

It fell in the time of the fishing that the man awoke in his house about the midst of the afternoon. The fire burned in the midst, and the smoke went up and the sun came down by the chimney. And the man was aware of the likeness of one that warmed his hands at the red peats.

'I greet you,' said the man, 'in the name of God.'

'I greet you,' said he that warmed his hands, 'but not in the name of God, for I am none of His; nor in the name of Hell, for I am not of Hell. For I am but a bloodless thing, less than wind and lighter than a sound, and the wind goes through me like a net, and I am broken by a sound and shaken by the cold.'

'Be plain with me,' said the man, 'and tell me your name and of your nature.'

'My name,' quoth the other, 'is not yet named, and my nature not yet sure. For I am part of a man; and I was a part of your fathers, and went out to fish and fight with them in the ancient days. But now is my turn not yet come; and I wait until you have a wife, and then shall I be in your son, and a brave part of him, rejoicing manfully to launch the boat into the surf, skilful to direct the helm, and a man of might where the ring closes and the blows are going.'

'This is a marvellous thing to hear,' said the man; 'and if you are indeed to be my son, I fear it will

go ill with you; for I am bitter poor in goods and bitter ugly in face, and I shall never get me a wife if I live to the age of eagles.'

'All this have I come to remedy, my Father,' said the Poor Thing; 'for we must go this night to the little isle of sheep, where our fathers lie in the dead-cairn, and to-morrow to the Earl's Hall, and there shall you find a wife by my providing.'

So the man rose and put forth his boat at the time of the sunsetting; and the Poor Thing sat in the prow, and the spray blew through his bones like snow, and the wind whistled in his teeth, and the boat dipped not with the weight of him.

'I am fearful to see you, my son,' said the man. 'For methinks you are no thing of God.'

'It is only the wind that whistles in my teeth,' said the Poor Thing, 'and there is no life in me to keep it out.'

So they came to the little isle of sheep, where the surf burst all about it in the midst of the sea, and it was all green with bracken, and all wet with dew, and the moon enlightened it. They ran the boat into a cove, and set foot to land; and the man came heavily behind among the rocks in the deepness of the bracken, but the Poor Thing went before him like a smoke in the light of the moon. So they came to the dead-cairn, and they laid their ears to the stones; and the dead complained withinsides like a swarm of bees: 'Time was that marrow was in our bones, and strength in our sinews; and the thoughts of our head were clothed upon with acts

and the words of men. But now are we broken in sunder, and the bonds of our bones are loosed, and our thoughts lie in the dust.'

Then said the Poor Thing: 'Charge them that they give you the virtue they withheld.'

And the man said: 'Bones of my fathers, greeting! for I am sprung of your loins. And now, behold, I break open the piled stones of your cairn, and I let in the noon between your ribs. Count it well done, for it was to be; and give me what I come seeking in the name of blood and in the name of God.'

And the spirits of the dead stirred in the cairn like ants; and they spoke: 'You have broken the roof of our cairn and let in the noon between our ribs; and you have the strength of the still-living. But what virtue have we? what power? or what jewel here in the dust with us, that any living man should covet or receive it? for we are less than nothing. But we tell you one thing, speaking with many voices like bees, that the way is plain before all like the grooves of launching: So forth into life and fear not, for so did we all in the ancient ages.' And their voices passed away like an eddy in a river.

'Now,' said the Poor Thing, 'they have told you a lesson, but make them give you a gift. Stoop your hand among the bones without drawback, and you shall find their treasure.'

So the man stooped his hand, and the dead laid hold upon it many and faint like ants; but he shook

them off, and behold, what he brought up in his hand was the shoe of a horse, and it was rusty.

'It is a thing of no price,' quoth the man, 'for it is rusty.'

'We shall see that,' said the Poor Thing; 'for in my thought it is a good thing to do what our fathers did, and to keep what they kept without question. And in my thought one thing is as good as another in this world; and a shoe of a horse will do.'

Now they got into their boat with the horse-shoe, and when the dawn was come they were aware of the smoke of the Earl's town and the bells of the Kirk that beat. So they set foot to shore: and the man went up to the market among the fishers over against the palace and the Kirk; and he was bitter poor and bitter ugly, and he had never a fish to sell, but only a shoe of a horse in his creel, and it rusty.

'Now,' said the Poor Thing, 'do so and so, and you shall find a wife and I a mother.'

It befell that the Earl's daughter came forth to go into the Kirk upon her prayers; and when she saw the poor man stand in the market with only the shoe of a horse, and it rusty, it came in her mind it should be a thing of price.

'What is that?' quoth she.

'It is a shoe of a horse,' said the man.

'And what is the use of it?' quoth the Earl's daughter.

'It is for no use,' said the man.

'I may not believe that,' said she; 'else why should you carry it?'

'I do so,' said he, 'because it was so my fathers did in the ancient ages; and I have neither a better reason nor a worse.'

Now the Earl's daughter could not find it in her mind to believe him. 'Come,' quoth she, 'sell me this, for I am sure it is a thing of price.'

'Nay,' said the man, 'the thing is not for sale.'

'What!' cried the Earl's daughter. 'Then what make you here in the town's market, with the thing in your creel and nought beside?'

'I sit here,' says the man, 'to get me a wife.'

'There is no sense in any of these answers,' thought the Earl's daughter; 'and I could find it in my heart to weep.'

By came the Earl upon that, and she called him and told him all. And when he had heard, he was of his daughter's mind that this should be a thing of virtue; and charged the man to set a price upon the thing, or else be hanged upon the gallows; and that was near at hand, so that the man could see it.

'The way of life is straight like the grooves of launching,' quoth the man. 'And if I am to be hanged let me be hanged.'

'Why!' cried the Earl, 'will you set your neck against the shoe of a horse, and it rusty?'

'In my thought,' said the man, 'one thing is as good as another in this world; and the shoe of a horse will do.'

'This can never be,' thought the Earl; and he stood and looked upon the man, and bit his beard.

And the man looked up at him and smiled. 'It was so my fathers did in the ancient ages,' quoth he to the Earl, 'and I have neither a better reason nor a worse.'

'There is no sense in any of this,' thought the Earl, 'and I must be growing old.' So he had his daughter on one side, and says he: 'Many suitors have you denied, my child. But here is a very strange matter that a man should cling so to a shoe of a horse, and it rusty; and that he should offer it like a thing on sale, and yet not sell it; and that he should sit there seeking a wife. If I come not to the bottom of this thing, I shall have no more pleasure in bread; and I can see no way, but either I should hang or you should marry him.'

'By my troth, but he is bitter ugly,' said the Earl's daughter. 'How if the gallows be so near at hand?'

'It was not so,' said the Earl, 'that my fathers did in the ancient ages. I am like the man, and can give you neither a better reason nor a worse. But do you, prithee, speak with him again.'

So the Earl's daughter spoke to the man. 'If you were not so bitter ugly,' quoth she, 'my father the Earl would have us marry.'

'Bitter ugly am I,' said the man, 'and you as fair as May. Bitter ugly I am, and what of that? It was so my fathers——'

'In the name of God!' said the Earl's daughter, 'let your fathers be!'

'If I had done that,' said the man, 'you had never been chaffering with me here in the market, nor your father the Earl watching with the end of his eye.'

'But come,' quoth the Earl's daughter, 'this is a very strange thing, that you would have me wed for a shoe of a horse, and it rusty.'

'In my thought,' quoth the man, 'one thing is as good——'

'O, spare me that,' said the Earl's daughter, 'and tell me why I should marry.'

'Listen and look,' said the man.

Now the wind blew through the Poor Thing like an infant crying, so that her heart was melted; and her eyes were unsealed, and she was aware of the thing as it were a babe unmothered, and she took it to her arms, and it melted in her arms like the air.

'Come,' said the man, 'behold a vision of our children, the busy hearth, and the white heads. And let that suffice, for it is all God offers.'

'I have no delight in it,' said she; but with that she sighed.

'The ways of life are straight like the grooves of launching,' said the man; and he took her by the hand.

'And what shall we do with the horse-shoe?' quoth she.

'I will give it to your father,' said the man, 'and he can make a kirk and a mill of it for me.'

It came to pass in time that the Poor Thing was

born; but memory of these matters slept with him, and he knew not that which he had done. But he was a part of the eldest son; rejoicing manfully to launch the boat into the surf, skilful to direct the helm, and a man of might where the ring closes and the blows are going.

XX

THE SONG OF THE MORROW

THE King of Duntrine had a daughter when he was old, and she was the fairest King's daughter between two seas; her hair was like spun gold, and her eyes like pools in a river; and the King gave her a castle upon the sea beach, with a terrace, and a court of the hewn stone, and four towers at the four corners. Here she dwelt and grew up, and had no care for the morrow, and no power upon the hour, after the manner of simple men.

It befell that she walked one day by the beach of the sea, when it was autumn, and the wind blew from the place of rains; and upon the one hand of her the sea beat, and upon the other the dead leaves ran. This was the loneliest beach between two seas, and strange things had been done there in the ancient ages. Now the King's daughter was aware of a crone that sat upon the beach. The sea-foam ran to her feet, and the dead leaves swarmed about

her back, and the rags blew about her face in the blowing of the wind.

'Now,' said the King's daughter, and she named a holy name, 'this is the most unhappy old crone between two seas.'

'Daughter of a King,' said the crone, 'you dwell in a stone house, and your hair is like the gold: but what is your profit? Life is not long, nor lives strong; and you live after the way of simple men, and have no thought for the morrow and no power upon the hour.'

'Thought for the morrow, that I have,' said the King's daughter; 'but power upon the hour, that have I not.' And she mused with herself.

Then the crone smote her lean hands one within the other, and laughed like a sea-gull. 'Home!' cried she. 'O daughter of a King, home to your stone house; for the longing is come upon you now, nor can you live any more after the manner of simple men. Home, and toil and suffer, till the gift come that will make you bare, and till the man come that will bring you care.'

The King's daughter made no more ado, but she turned about and went home to her house in silence. And when she was come into her chamber she called for her nurse.

'Nurse,' said the King's daughter, 'thought is come upon me for the morrow, so that I can live no more after the manner of simple men. Tell me what I must do that I may have power upon the hour.'

Then the nurse moaned like a snow wind. 'Alas!' said she, 'that this thing should be; but the thought is gone into your marrow, nor is there any cure against the thought. Be it so, then, even as you will; though power is less than weakness, power shall you have; and though the thought is colder than winter, yet shall you think it to an end.'

So the King's daughter sat in her vaulted chamber in the masoned house, and she thought upon the thought. Nine years she sat; and the sea beat upon the terrace, and the gulls cried about the turrets, and wind crooned in the chimneys of the house. Nine years she came not abroad, nor tasted the clean air, neither saw God's sky. Nine years she sat and looked neither to the right nor to the left, nor heard speech of any one, but thought upon the thought of the morrow. And her nurse fed her in silence, and she took of the food with her left hand, and ate it without grace.

Now when the nine years were out, it fell dusk in the autumn, and there came a sound in the wind like a sound of piping. At that the nurse lifted up her finger in the vaulted house.

'I hear a sound in the wind,' said she, 'that is like the sound of piping.'

'It is but a little sound,' said the King's daughter, 'but yet it is sound enough for me.'

So they went down in the dusk to the doors of the house, and along the beach of the sea. And the waves beat upon the one hand, and upon the

other the dead leaves ran; and the clouds raced in the sky, and the gulls flew widdershins. And when they came to that part of the beach where strange things had been done in the ancient ages, lo, there was the crone, and she was dancing widdershins.

'What makes you dance widdershins, old crone?' said the King's daughter; 'here upon the bleak beach, between the waves and the dead leaves?'

'I hear a sound in the wind that is like a sound of piping,' quoth she. 'And it is for that that I dance widdershins. For the gift comes that will make you bare, and the man comes that must bring you care. But for me the morrow is come that I have thought upon, and the hour of my power.'

'How comes it, crone,' said the King's daughter, 'that you waver like a rag, and pale like a dead leaf before my eyes?'

'Because the morrow has come that I have thought upon, and the hour of my power,' said the crone; and she fell on the beach, and, lo! she was but stalks of the sea tangle, and dust of the sea sand, and the sand-lice hopped upon the place of her.

'This is the strangest thing that befell between two seas,' said the King's daughter of Duntrine.

But the nurse broke out and moaned like an autumn gale. 'I am weary of the wind,' quoth she; and she bewailed her day.

The King's daughter was aware of a man upon

the beach; he went hooded so that none might perceive his face, and a pipe was underneath his arm. The sound of his pipe was like singing wasps, and like the wind that sings in windlestraw; and it took hold upon men's ears like the crying of gulls.

'Are you the comer?' quoth the King's daughter of Duntrine.

'I am the comer,' said he, 'and these are the pipes that a man may hear, and I have power upon the hour, and this is the song of the morrow.' And he piped the song of the morrow, and it was as long as years; and the nurse wept out aloud at the hearing of it.

'This is true,' said the King's daughter, 'that you pipe the song of the morrow; but that ye have power upon the hour, how may I know that? Show me a marvel here upon the beach, between the waves and the dead leaves.'

And the man said, 'Upon whom?'

'Here is my nurse,' quoth the King's daughter. 'She is weary of the wind. Show me a good marvel upon her.'

And, lo! the nurse fell upon the beach as it were two handfuls of dead leaves, and the wind whirled them widdershins, and the sand-lice hopped between.

'It is true,' said the King's daughter of Duntrine; 'you are the comer, and you have power upon the hour. Come with me to my stone house.'

So they went by the sea margin, and the man

piped the song of the morrow, and the leaves followed behind them as they went. Then they sat down together; and the sea beat on the terrace, and the gulls cried about the towers, and the wind crooned in the chimneys of the house. Nine years they sat, and every year when it fell autumn the man said, 'This is the hour, and I have power in it'; and the daughter of the King said, 'Nay, but pipe me the song of the morrow.' And he piped it, and it was long like years.

Now when the nine years were gone, the King's daughter of Duntrine got her to her feet, like one that remembers; and she looked about her in the masoned house; and all her servants were gone; only the man that piped sat upon the terrace with the hand upon his face; and as he piped the leaves ran about the terrace and the sea beat along the wall. Then she cried to him with a great voice, 'This is the hour, and let me see the power in it.' And with that the wind blew off the hand from the man's face, and, lo! there was no man there, only the clothes and the hand and the pipes tumbled one upon another in a corner of the terrace, and the dead leaves ran over them.

And the King's daughter of Duntrine got her to that part of the beach where strange things had been done in the ancient ages; and there she sat her down. The sea foam ran to her feet, and the dead leaves swarmed about her back, and the veil blew about her face in the blowing of the wind. And when she lifted up her eyes, there

was the daughter of a King come walking on the beach. Her hair was like the spun gold, and her eyes like pools in a river, and she had no thought for the morrow and no power upon the hour, after the manner of simple men.

THE WORKS OF
R. L. STEVENSON

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